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Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe

MUSIC AND POLITICS

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“This wonderful collection shows that populism is more than just parties, movements and leaders – it extends into popular culture as well. Theoretically-imaginative and empirically-rigorous, it considers the intersection of populism and popular music in Europe, and opens up new avenues for thinking about how populism operates in the 21st century.”

Benjamin Moffitt, *Associate Professor of Politics, Australian Catholic University*

“*Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe* by Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller is an original and thought-provoking exploration into the entanglement of populism and popular culture. The volume presents a culture-centric lens to understand the rise of populism in contemporary Europe, thereby making a very welcome contribution to an increasingly saturated field of research. A must-read for scholars and students of populism who are interested in understanding the multifaceted dimensions of populist influences.”

Léonie de Jonge, *Assistant Professor in European Politics and Society, University of Groningen*

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POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

This book focuses on the role of popular music in the rise of populism in Europe, centring on the music-related processes of sociocultural normalisation and the increasing prevalence of populist discourses in contemporary society. In its innovative combination of approaches drawing from (ethno)musicology, sociology, and political science, as well as media and cultural studies, this book develops a culture-oriented approach to populism. Based on shared research questions, an original theoretical framework and a combination of innovative methodologies that pay attention to the specific socio-historical contexts, taking into account musical material as well as processes of reception, the five chapters in this volume offer detailed analyses of the nexus of popular music and populism in Hungary, Italy, Austria, Sweden and Germany. All of these countries have seen a marked increase in populist parties and discourses over the last years, as well as significant interactions between populism and popular music. This book will be essential reading for those investigating popular music as a crucial aspect in the study of populism as a cultural phenomenon in Europe.

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Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe
Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

Edited by Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

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POPULAR MUSIC AND THE RISE OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

An introduction[1]

Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

On July 30, 2016, tens of thousands of people donned lederhosen and dirndl to celebrate Andreas Gabalier's sold-out show in Munich's Olympic Stadium. The scale of the event testified to Gabalier's increased popularity in German-speaking countries. In fact, the Austrian musician, who has repeatedly expressed sympathies for the far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria, has become one of the most successful artists with German-speaking audiences in recent years. In addition to showcasing Gabalier's enormous popularity in German-speaking regions, however, the concert in Munich was also remarkable for another reason: it took place one week after nine people were killed and thirty-six injured by an 18-year-old Iranian-German inside the Olympia shopping mall near the stadium. The teenager's motives were unknown at the time, but false rumours of Islamist terrorism were one prominent explanation.[2]

Whilst Gabalier was careful not to make any clear statements about the incident, he nonetheless alluded to it between songs:

> It is sad enough that you even have to think about whether to still go to concerts on days like these, whether you still go out of the house, whether you still go out in public somewhere, somehow [cheers, Gabalier pauses]. That's pretty bitter, because we're actually a very, very happy and sociable culture, we Austrians just like you Germans, and, and, what do I want to say now? Everything I'm thinking, I'd just rather not say, because, because I have to watch out for you guys. But I can say one thing: I am so happy that you are here today. And I am glad that you also take a young Styrian boy from Austria as he is, who now and then also says what he thinks, because it is still nicer, despite all these worries that the country currently brings with it, here with you in Germany, and also at

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> home in Austria. It's a big challenge that we have to face at the moment, and [pause]. Well, that's all I'm saying.[3]

Gabalier used this subtle reference to an ostensible security crisis to introduce his 2015 protest song "A Meinung haben" ("Having an Opinion"), in which his persona heroically confronts political correctness as dictated by an unnamed elite and presents himself as a lone warrior for free speech. The song thereby invokes the populist trope of the silent majority, and questions whether Austria is truly democratic. More specifically, "A Meinung haben" celebrates Gabalier's famous refusal to sing the revised official lyrics of the Austrian national anthem, voted into effect by the Austrian parliament in 2012, in which not only are the nation's "great sons" revered, but its "great daughters" too. As such, "A Meinung haben" has become something of a signature song for Gabalier, who projects a self-styled rebellious persona and flaunts an opinion that runs contrary to the supposedly dominant regime of elite politics and political correctness.

By introducing "A Meinung haben" with a speech that gestured, albeit obliquely, to a recent act of alleged Islamist terrorism in Munich, Gabalier not only reinforces his persona as politically outspoken in the face of powerful elites, but also alludes to the populist notion of the silent majority – that is, "the people" – who share an opinion which cannot be expressed publicly. Accordingly, his hesitancy to say what he is really thinking is, he claims, to protect his audience ("because I have to watch out for you guys"). Note that it would not threaten Gabalier himself, the unwavering rebel, but – such is the implicit assumption – the audience might be penalised in public discourse, supposedly dominated by political correctness. Furthermore, Gabalier, who describes himself here as a simple and down-to-earth "young Styrian boy" from the countryside, connects this silent majority with the "very, very happy and sociable" culture of Austria and Germany – as opposed to the implied Other that poses a serious threat to these ostensibly natural national lifestyles.

Besides illustrating how populist politics are actively negotiated in contemporary popular music culture in German-speaking countries, this example also raises a number of questions: what does the concept of populism entail in a popular culture context? How do music and musical performance negotiate populism? To what extent is Gabalier's popular success emblematic of a larger normalisation, or mainstreaming, of populist discourses in German-speaking countries, or Europe more broadly? And how do audiences interpret performances and articulations of populism? In its attempt to answer these questions, this book argues that in some ways, Andreas Gabalier does indeed exemplify broader developments within popular music cultures in Europe. Populism and popular music culture are intricately intertwined in contemporary Europe, and it is necessary to explore the ways in which they interact.

What, then, is populism? All of the reference works that have been published on the topic in recent years agree that it is notoriously difficult to define.[4] In addition to being a common political *Kampfbegriff*[5] in many countries, populism

has been approached from a wide range of research traditions and perspectives. Whilst historically oriented studies tend to associate the development of the term with the US Populist Party, and therefore with a democratic social movement (Goodwyn 1976; Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Postel 2009), other definitions have described populism as an emancipatory resource (Laclau 2005), a political strategy (Weyland 2017), an economic policy (Dornbusch and Edwards 1991), a communication style (Block and Negrine 2017), or an ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Benjamin Moffitt has grouped these perspectives into three main categories: ideational, strategic, and discursive-performative. Ideational perspectives consider populism to be an ideology that lacks substance and is therefore "thin-centred" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 6). Strategic approaches, meanwhile, view populism as a specific "way to pursue and sustain power" (Moffitt 2020, 17; Weyland 2001), whilst discursive-performative approaches regard populism as a kind of language or communication (Moffitt 2020, 22; Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2020).

Due to the term's polyvalence, attempts have been made to distinguish between different varieties of populism. Indeed, research that focuses on specific regions often prioritises certain concepts of populism over others. Strategic approaches are prevalent in research on South America, for instance, whilst ideational perspectives are prominent in studies of European populisms. To systematise populism, given its adaptability, scholars have differentiated between Latin American, African, Central and Eastern European, Western European, US, East Asian, Indian, and other regional varieties.[6] Moreover, researchers have defined subcategories of populism such as inclusionary, exclusionary, right-wing, left-wing, syncretic, and others (Downes and Xu 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Despite these variations, a significant majority of researchers agree that populism's primary function is to operate a conceptual division of society into two antagonistic groups: the people and the elite. Populism therefore denotes ways of discursively and performatively casting the people as a group engaged in a struggle on a vertical (bottom-up) axis of conflict with a corrupt elite. It then invests this antagonism with affective significance. As Lawrence Rosenthal, Chantal Mouffe, and others have pointed out, the failure or success of populism depends on the extent to which it is able to appeal to people's emotional and affective faculties (Mouffe 2018; Rosenthal 2020).

Over the last decade populist politics have gained real prominence in European contexts. The rise of populism has been described as a major threat to European social order, as it is deemed to undermine the core democratic and egalitarian values on which the European Union was founded. This argument has been particularly prevalent among Western European researchers with liberal democratic commitments, such as the German populism researcher Jan-Werner Müller (Müller 2016). Assessments of the alleged danger posed by populism to democracy often revolve around the question of whether or not populism's dualisms and dichotomies are dangerous *per se*, or whether they are a necessary aspect of political

transformations. Whilst Müller argues that populism always invites Manichean thinking and the vilification of a particular group of people, Mouffe sees the confrontations inherent in populism as a necessary means of democratic political change (Mouffe, 2018). Following Mouffe's embrace of populism, we see populism in Europe as a complex phenomenon that precludes reductive assessments and judgements. The last ten years have seen the rise of a wide array of populisms in Europe, ranging from left-wing (such as Syriza and Podemos) to syncretic (such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Slovakian Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party), and far-right variants. It is therefore necessary to theoretically distinguish populism from related discourses that represent genuine, major challenges for European societies, such as far-right extremism and authoritarianism.

As Lawrence Rosenthal has argued, the 2010s saw "populism's toxic embrace of nationalism" in European and North American societies (Rosenthal 2020). This is true of most European national parliaments, where populist-nationalist and far-right parties have gained more than a foothold. Such populist-nationalist parties as the League and Brothers of Italy (FDI) in Italy, Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in Austria, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, Danish People's Party (DPP) in Denmark, Finns Party (PS) in Finland, and Sweden Democrats (SD) in Sweden have already participated in and formed governments, in coalition with both established parties and other populists. The German Alternative for Germany (AfD), Estonian Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE), Latvian National Alliance (NA), Dutch Forum for Democracy (FVD), and Spanish party Vox have gained large swaths of the popular vote in national elections, and in some of the Visegrád countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, populist-nationalist politics and discourses have become hegemonic.[7] Meanwhile, non-nationalist, left-wing, and syncretic varieties of populism have been on the wane (Moffitt 2020, 67).

The reasons behind this rise in populist far-right politics are manifold, and their salience in public discourse is itself subject to contestation. They range from economic crises such as the Great Recession of the late 2000s and the further expansion of a neoliberal financial regime, to an increase in economic and social insecurity for the large majority of people, the continuing erosion of the welfare state, changes in patterns of global migration (such as 2015's "summer of migration" and, in 2022, the influx of refugees to European countries in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine), larger technological transformations and developments in media culture (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013, xvii; Reckwitz 2012), progressive value change (Inglehart and Norris 2019), and the diminishing influence of an "old establishment" in various social, political, and economic sectors (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). Populism researchers have also pointed to the significance of crises in populist discourse (Moffitt 2016; Brubaker 2017), and the past decade and a half have provided an array of events that have been framed as such. This framing has been facilitated by a political and media culture in which crisis, as "a category of social and political practice," is "mobilized to do specific political work" (Brubaker 2017, 373). Notably, the crisis frame seems particularly

relevant for populist nationalism, which proffers the nation state as the safe haven of the people.

The frame of populism itself, however, has also become a subject of debate. In particular, it has been criticised for functioning to obscure more than it reveals. According to the German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer, the term populism has served to banalise the rise of authoritarian nationalism in Europe (Heitmeyer 2018). Similarly, Mondon and Winter (2020) have argued that populism's popularity amongst academics has contributed to downplaying ongoing practices of xenophobia and racism, and the structures that enable them, in contemporary Western democracies. We agree with these assessments. Bearing these calls for caution in mind, however, we argue that the frame of populism is nonetheless crucial in any attempt to come to terms with contemporary social change. As this book demonstrates, populism, as a discursive and performative practice, is a widespread – albeit ambiguous – phenomenon that has shown itself to be remarkably successful at permeating contemporary popular culture, and that continues to be central to political and cultural change. In popular music it is often difficult to pin one political ideology to a particular genre, song, artist, or reception practice, even if they are highly relevant to political discourse by reproducing the populist dichotomy of "us" versus "them." It is therefore important to engage with the term populism critically and in ways that are context-sensitive, as well as to closely examine how populism is articulated in popular music cultures. This will allow us to gain a clearer picture of how populism may be empirically enmeshed with discriminatory practices such as racism and sexism, as well as political discourses such as nationalism.

Whilst the political traction of populist nationalism is often examined via a focus on party politics, we argue that this approach does not sufficiently explain the rise of populism and populist nationalism in Europe. Indeed, a far more fruitful perspective from which to understand the rise of populism in Europe, and its embrace of nationalism, is a discursive-performative one. As Benjamin Moffitt argues, "[w]e need to move from seeing populism as a particular 'thing' or entity towards viewing it as a *political style* that is performed, embodied and enacted across a variety of political and cultural contexts" (Moffitt 2016, 3, emphasis in original). Though discursive-performative approaches vary depending on their understanding of discourse, they all agree that populism should be treated as a complex phenomenon that reaches beyond the realm of party politics. As such, populism is a cultural phenomenon. It is ingrained in everyday culture and performed in myriad ways that are often difficult to grasp.

Against this backdrop, the chapters presented here ask: What is the role of popular music cultures in the rise of populism in Europe?

Cultures of populism: Towards a culture-oriented approach

Studies on the recent rise of populism and its various articulations have analysed several reasons behind the growing support for populist parties and movements,

both nationally and internationally. Yet, these have remained largely limited to political and economic perspectives, neglecting insights from other fields such as cultural studies (Marchart 2010; Moran and Littler 2020). This volume, therefore, argues that the cultural dimension of populism must be addressed so as to gain a more complete understanding of how populism has been able to attract the widespread support that it has in Europe (and elsewhere). So far, arguments about cultural aspects of populism have tended to fall into two camps. Either they are limited to a cultural backlash thesis, which holds that the recent rise of populism can best be explained as a reaction against progressive cultural change (Norris and Inglehart 2019), or, as in the case of Juha Herkman's recent *A Cultural Approach to Populism*, hold to a view of populism as merely a "political phenomenon" (Herkman 2022, 8) tied to the empirical field of political parties or movements. Our focus, however, relies less on essentialising cultural claims that consolidate (rather than challenge) populist dichotomies, as we are more interested in how populist discourses are articulated in the realm of (popular) culture and music in particular. As such, we aim to broaden the frames through which populism is understood by discussing it as a cultural phenomenon beyond the narrow field of party politics, politicians, and political movements.

Populism's changing discursive power in society needs to be understood as part of a broader cultural struggle. As Laclau reminds us, categories such as the people and common sense are not preexisting social givens, but are in fact constructed through discourse. Following Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is not limited to words and ideas, but rather denotes all "systems of meaningful practices that form identities of subjects and objects through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2002, 3–4). This performative construction of the people versus the elite – mostly in nationalist and exclusionary terms (Müller 2016) in contemporary Europe – is what characterises populist projects. Populist discourses can therefore be understood as hegemonic struggles for power in their attempts to fix meanings and identities (Moffitt 2020, 21), to win the consent of other groups, and to achieve a kind of ascendancy over them in both thought and practice (Hall 2003). On the one hand, populism presents itself as counter-hegemonic by claiming to challenge the dominant culture, and the political and social status quo, playing the role of the oppositional underdog, whilst on the other hand, it simultaneously claims to be the true and rightful representative of the ("silent") majority. To achieve hegemony,[8] it is necessary to create a basic level of consensus in which a social group can present its own interests as the general interests of society as a whole (Gramsci 1998).

This hegemonic struggle plays out in what Gramsci calls the "war of positions": an ideological struggle over definitions of the people and common sense, in which existing elements are dismantled and reconstituted into a new logic (Hall 1979). This war of positions is not only political, but also cultural, in as much as culture is a terrain of ideological struggle over meanings and the discursive construction

of (new) societal norms. As such, (popular) culture plays an important role in this conflict as it is a site

> where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.
>
> *(Hall 1998, 453)*

In fact, as Stuart Hall points out, popular culture is the primary site for constituting the people (Hall 1998, 452).[9]

Of course, these discursive struggles over cultural hegemony are not (always) articulated as explicitly political messages, but most often work indirectly and invisibly, at the level of representation, signs and myths, affect and emotions. Since (popular) culture is not only concerned with concepts and ideas, but just as much with feelings, attachments, and emotions (Hall 2003), it is particularly fertile terrain for creating a sense of collective identity, (national) community, and belonging. As Fiske reminds us, it is important to remember that audiences play a constitutive role in the attribution and creation of (alternative) meanings as political acts (Fiske 2002). As such, popular culture is never a one-sided medium of communication, for instance for the dissemination of populist messages, but always consists of both consent and resistance that must be analysed and understood in their specific contexts.

It is particularly surprising that populism scholarship has neglected popular culture, given that populist actors[10] often hone in on socio-cultural issues such as cultural change resulting from immigration (Mudde 2010), claiming to represent the (national) culture of the common people whilst drawing on popular cultural means of expression. Because culture is so central to any hegemonic project, as Hall writes, populism (in his case, Thatcherism) works on the basis of existing social practices and lived ideologies (Hall 1979). As we have seen, "populism takes these cultural elements which are already constructed into place, dismantles them, reconstitutes them into a new logic and articulates [them] in a new way, polarizing [them] to the Right" (Hall 1979, 16). Besides the obvious notions of an authentic people and a corrupt elite, particularly salient concepts in European contexts that are frequently rearticulated in populist terms include the nation and national (memory) culture, the heartland or *Heimat* and a sense of belonging, rurality as opposed to urbanism, gendered identities, and taste communities, amongst others.

Since hegemony-building always involves social and cultural processes that extend beyond the political realm (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020), populists frequently employ popular cultural forms of expression. For a better understanding of these, Pierre Ostiguy's socio-cultural conceptualisation of populism contains some very valuable insights. Populism has, of course, long used simplified messages and affective appeals directed at the so-called people; Ostiguy's contribution

is a discussion of populism's social connotations. With the notion of "flaunting the low," Ostiguy points to how populist actors not only construct the people, but also appeal to the public by performing seemingly improper approaches to politics, and disregarding conventionally correct modes of expression. This may involve manners, demeanour, ways of speaking and dressing, vernacular codes, and culturally popular tastes displayed in public. By behaving in this way, populist actors aim to present themselves as authentic, cultural nativists close to those they claim to represent. As Ostiguy concludes, "populism is defined as the antagonistic, mobilizational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native, and of personalism as a mode of decision-making" (Ostiguy 2017, 84).

More recently, Ostiguy, Moffitt, and Panizza have recommended a "performative and discursive approach to populism," arguing that "populist actors constitute popular political identities through performative practices that range from political speeches to transgressive 'low culture' performances which resonate locally" (Ostiguy et al. 2021, 2). This post-Laclauian approach is certainly valuable for recognising the relational link between populism and culture (by connecting content to style). However, it still misses the fundamental role of (popular) culture in the construction and representation of the populist people and its dichotomous, antagonistic Other, as well as in the dissemination and normalisation of populist discourses in wider society in and through (popular) culture. By remaining focused on the way in which populist actors use strategic performances and styles to gain political support, Ostiguy et al. remain limited to a narrowly-defined political realm, overlooking broader and more fundamental shifts, such as the ongoing redistribution of the sensible order (Rancière 2004)[11] along populist lines in contemporary European societies. Whilst they rightly highlight the fact that "populism redefines what is *sayable*, and hence also doable, in politics" (Ostiguy et al. 2021, 8, emphasis in original), their appraisal of culture sees it only as a resource for transgressive behaviour, rather than an equally important realm in which populist discourses are negotiated. Meanwhile, in *A Cultural Approach to Populism*, Herkman is right to observe that populism combines the cultural processes of signification and affective identification with political identities by giving politicised meanings to things and creating social belonging and exclusion (Herkman 2022, 35). However, his discussion does not go beyond populism's challenge to *political* hegemony, and overlooks the importance of (everyday) cultural practices.

Considering the centrality of (popular) culture for any hegemonic project, it is therefore obvious that the recent rise of populism in Europe must be understood as a wider discursive shift in society that surpasses the realm of party politics. Andreas Reckwitz, for instance, has indicated the importance of the cultural dimension in radical right-wing populist movements. As he puts it, "Right-wing populism is [. . .] not only party politics; it pursues a policy of ideas that aims at achieving cultural hegemony."[12] Likewise, Miller-Idriss has also pointed out that the far right is not simply a political movement, but a site of (sub-)cultural engagement (Miller-Idriss 2017).

This book therefore proposes a culture-oriented approach to populism, and takes a closer look at what we call *cultures of populism* to interrogate the complex interconnections between the cultural articulations of populist actors on one hand, and the wider cultural shifts that both enable and result from these articulations on the other. By cultures of populism we mean the ways in which systems of meaning and cultural practices function to constitute, communicate, and reinforce populist attitudes on a discursive, interpretative, and performative level. Our understanding of culture thereby builds on Doris Bachmann-Medick's revision of the "culture-as-text" paradigm (Bachmann-Medick 2012). With reference to Clifford Geertz and Andreas Reckwitz, Bachmann-Medick contends that viewing cultures as mere systems of meaning risks reducing them to their semiotic shape (102). She demands instead that texts – cultural products – be understood not as carriers of immanent meaning, but rather "as the result of an attribution of meaning by [their] recipients" (Bachmann-Medick 2012, 104; see also Reckwitz 2012, 606). However, we aim to avoid notions of cultural populism that overestimate audience empowerment, whilst neglecting the political economy of popular culture (Fiske 2002). Our point, following McGuigan, is precisely that popular culture is "*both* ordinary people's everyday culture *and* its material construction by powerful forces beyond the immediate comprehension and control of ordinary people" (McGuigan 1992, 5, emphasis in original). This is what makes popular culture such a significant field for the performance, constitution, and negotiation of populist discourses.

When studying the rise of populism in Europe, then, it is essential to focus on cultural transformation as much as changes in party politics. Here, Ruth Wodak and others have already highlighted the ways in which popular culture has contributed to normalising populist far-right discourses (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019; Wodak 2018). Culture's role as a site of normalisation can be approached from a variety of perspectives. We argue that normalisation is a multi-layered process. The combination of discourses such as nationalism and populism may itself be investigated through the lens of a normalisation that results from their enmeshment. De Cleen and Stavrakakis define nationalism as

> a discourse structured around the nodal point 'nation', envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out opposition between the nation and its out-groups.
>
> *(De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017)*

By contrast, they describe populism as a vertical rather than horizontal discourse that differentiates between low (the people) and high (the elite) social groups (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 310; Moffitt 2020, 34).[13] Consequently, populism imbues nationalism with the additional axiology of an oppressed people versus their oppressors which can serve not only to discursively construct a (national) people, but also justify that people's ostensible struggle against an illegitimate

power bloc (Mondon and Winter 2020, 20, 147–198). By justifying the struggle of a nationally defined people in this way, populism further normalises nationalism by presenting it as a righteous cause.

In addition to their resulting from the above combination of discourses, processes of normalisation are often described as movements of discursive elements from the fringes to the social centre or mainstream. Rheindorf and Wodak, for instance, illustrate this with the image of a smaller "fringe" cloud of far-right discourse which disseminates elements to the larger cloud of "mainstream discourse" (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019, 307). On their way to the larger cloud, materials from the fringe pass through a catalyst which involves processes of "recontextualization" and "resemiotization." These may take place in various kinds of media, through the different branches of government, and via educational institutions. From this perspective, normalisation primarily involves the unidirectional movement of ideas and discourses from a smaller (radical) margin to the considerably larger centre. Accordingly, Rheindorf and Wodak consider normalisation to describe "how ideologies are incorporated into the mainstream – not only of politics but of popular culture and other fields as well – through recontextualizations and semiotic reinterpretations, usually moving from offstage to onstage, and across fields as well as genres" (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019, 307).

Whilst Rheindorf and Wodak's model assumes the normalisation of far-right ideologies to be a one-way process, we suggest some adaptations. We argue that the investigation of popular culture shows how processes of normalisation must be regarded as multi-directional rather than unidirectional. In addition to disseminating discourses from the fringes, normalisation also relies on mobilising the potential for radicalisation that already exists in society.[14] As such, normalisation often involves performing, and thus accentuating, those cultural practices that are compatible with extremist discourses. These may include the glorification of heroic masculinity in superhero aesthetics, the celebration of national pride that accompanies football matches, tacit opposition to the implications of gender equality, broadly accepted racist stereotypes, and so on. Processes of normalisation, then, involve rearticulating common cultural tropes along populist or extremist lines. Besides transferring discourses from the fringes to the mainstream, normalisation requires the reinterpretation and recontextualisation of aspects of mainstream popular culture. In turn, it also involves the articulation of populist or extremist discourses through signs and practices from popular culture. This serves to "popify" (Schiller 2022) and alter fringe discourses and performances, thus blurring the boundaries between fringe and mainstream by establishing new, multidirectional connections and compatibilities. The investigation of cultural change – and changes in popular culture in particular – is therefore central to understanding processes of populist mainstreaming, by which we mean the sociocultural normalisation and increased prevalence of populist discourses, both in specific contexts and society at large.

Populism and popular music

This book therefore investigates popular music as one aspect – albeit a highly significant one – of populism as a cultural phenomenon. The profound cultural significance of music is often discussed from an economic perspective, particularly in the context of the European Union, where music constitutes one of the largest sectors within the cultural and creative industries. In fact, the European Commission posits that music boasts "the largest audience" of any of the cultural and creative sectors in the European economy (European Commission 2020; Hogan 2020). Music's cultural and social functions, however, are more far-reaching than quantifiable data about the EU's music sector may suggest. As research in popular music studies and ethnomusicology reveals, music and sound have become "ubiquitous" (Kassabian 2013) in our everyday lives. Whether we pay attention to it or not, music surrounds us – from the song we may select as our morning alarm to the playlist chosen by the algorithm of our streaming service (Boschi et al. 2013). The ways in which people engage with music seem endless, and range from trying to ignore the aural spaces that we inhabit to participating in shows, dancing, and producing new sounds via both technologies and our bodies (Kassabian 2013). From participation in spectacular large-scale shows to all kinds of everyday "musicking"[15] practices (Small 1998), music plays a significant role in how we make sense of and engage with the world.

If, following Gramsci, we understand culture to be inherently political, music undoubtedly has real potential as a political practice. Investigations into the ways in which music is and can be political have shifted in recent decades from approaches that locate the politics of music within music itself (with an interest in explicitly political music) to theories emphasising music's context, positionality, and situatedness (Garratt 2019, 33–35). Regarding music as discourse and performance, the chapters in this book explore the ways in which music can become political depending on individual actors as well as cultural contexts and situations. Those involved in musicking practices – from politicians to celebrities, audiences, and listeners in certain social, cultural, and situational contexts – are therefore central when it comes to understanding the politics of music at a given moment.

To account for the significance of how music is received as a process in which individual people actively create, interrogate, and negotiate meanings, affects, and politics, the chapters presented here draw on the concept of musical affordance as laid out by Tia DeNora. In *Music in Everyday Life* (DeNora 2000), DeNora compares the way in which people use music to their interactions with other material objects, arguing that

> Objects 'afford' actors certain things; a ball, for example, affords rolling, bouncing and kicking in a way that a cube of the same size, texture and weight would not. So, too, the particular materials of the cookies afford certain marketing ploys and will not afford others.
>
> *(DeNora 2000, 39)*

Music makes possible some uses and interpretations, whilst preventing others. Music's affordances, therefore, are far from arbitrary. Rather, they rely on the ways in which people make use of the expansive yet limited range of possibilities that music affords. As such, affordances may include interpretations as well as bodily engagements, movements, affects, and emotional responses. Musical affordances depend on the active and often creative work of music reception.

An awareness of music's affordances, and the accompanying impossibility of imbuing music with absolute meaning, seems particularly relevant in relation to populism. In many cultures, music has a long history of according meaningful references and practices to abstract communal concepts that are relevant to populism, such as the people or the nation. As Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter have argued, the idea of a German nation, for instance, is closely intertwined with the notion that Germans are a "people of music" (Applegate and Potter 2002, 1–3). Music also draws on a large tradition of ascribing meaning to antagonisms – as one can see in revolutionary songs, war songs, or the protest song genre, for instance. What is more, music functions not only in a semiotic, interpretative way, but is also effective at the level of affect. As Lawrence Rosenthal, Chantal Mouffe, and others have argued, the affective dimension is highly pertinent for the success of populist discourses and social movements. Mouffe even identifies their affective impact as one of the main reasons for the recent popular success of European right-wing populist parties. As she puts it, these parties "have successfully mobilized common affects in constructing a people whose voice calls for a democracy aimed at defending the interests of 'true nationals'" (Mouffe 2018). We would add that this popular success has much to do with the ways in which music has served to mobilise these common affects (Dunkel and Schiller 2022).

The ways in which music can serve populist discourses may be approached from three main directions. The first addresses the role of music within the strategies and practices of politicians, the second centres on musicians as political figures, and the third has to do with the politics of music reception as an active and creative process. Music's wide reach and enmeshment in people's everyday lives make it possible for politicians and political actors to draw on it in the service of their political goals. Although music's ability to directly support politicians' messages varies, it often has to do with tapping into the affective power of musical aesthetics as a political resource. This practice is by no means limited to contemporary politics, but rather harks back to the general use of music as a means within a broader set of strategies for political mobilisation (Patch 2016; Street 2012). Some of the first international hit recordings in the history of popular music were written as campaign songs, such as W.C. Handy's "Memphis Blues," which famously became an international smash hit after having aided Edward H. Crump's 1909 campaign to become Mayor of Memphis. According to Handy, "it was known to politicians that the best notes made the most votes" (quoted in Johnson 2014, 53).

As actors across the political spectrum continue to make use of popular music's affective power, the boundaries between politics and popular music have become

porous (Cooper 2008; Street 2012; Dunkel and Schiller 2022). Bruce Jordan, for instance, argues that Barack Obama successfully employed popular music in a populist aesthetic strategy to mobilise political support (Jordan 2013), and Oded Erez (2022) highlights how Miri Regev drew heavily on the taste cultures and aesthetic economy of talent shows during her term as Israel's Minister of Culture and Sports in Netanyahu's right-wing populist government (2015–2020). The Italian populist Beppe Grillo's use of music also exemplifies this development. In the years following the foundation of his party M5S, Grillo wrote songs, performed at rallies, and organised music festivals such as the Woodstock 5 Stelle, which not only served to mobilise support for his party but also created the impression that the party was in fact a movement. Similarly, in Sweden, the leader of the populist radical right Sweden Democrats, Jimmie Åkesson, plays in a rock band that regularly performs at party events such as the annual Summer Festival (see Schiller chapter in this volume). Since sound and music have the power to evoke an array of affects and emotions – from anxiety and anger to relaxation and happiness – they can be highly effective means of tying political messages and concrete policies to deeply felt emotional responses.

Secondly, just as populist politicians have appealed to their base by performing as musicians and using popular music in campaigns, some musicians have likewise taken up prominent roles as populist actors. In February 2021, youth demonstrations erupted across Spain following the arrest of the rapper Pablo Hásel for glorifying terrorism and disparaging the monarchy. Hásel is a controversial figure. On the one hand, his critique of glaring social inequalities is irrefutable: at the time of his arrest, youth unemployment had risen to about 40%. In many ways, Spain is an extreme case of a larger crisis, that of diminishing future perspectives for young Europeans. On the other, Hásel's lyrics promote extreme violence and terrorism, including the use of car bombs against those he deems the elite. In addition to speaking out against police brutality, Hásel is known for likening Spanish judges to Nazis and celebrating the Basque separatist and terrorist organisation ETA (Casey 2021).

Musicians in other European countries have likewise become active in populist movements. In Italy, the rise of the M5S in the early 2010s was supported by well-known musicians including the rapper Fedez and the singer-songwriter Cristiano De André (see Caiani and Padoan in this volume). In Germany, the iconic singer Xavier Naidoo, who has previously spread antisemitic conspiracy theories, has repeatedly been referred to as a leading figure in protests against government policies to contain the Covid-19 pandemic (see Dunkel and Kopanski in this volume). In Hungary, where populist nationalism and authoritarianism are hegemonic, the far-right extremist members of the band Kárpátia have composed and performed music commissioned by the Hungarian military to accompany the arrival of fifty new Leopard II tanks from Germany (see Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják in this volume). The Hungarian example also demonstrates the extent to which musical, political, and economic developments in different European countries can be intricately interwoven. As an article in *Der Spiegel* makes clear, the silence of the

German government about the use of far-right extremist music to celebrate the arrival of German tanks is consistent with the interest of their military industry to sell weaponry to one of its best clients (Verseck 2020).

However, musicians can also become political actors in ways that are subtler than the example of Kárpátia might suggest. The politics of Andreas Gabalier, for instance, are not so easy to pin down. In public statements, he has repeatedly denied that his music is in any way political (Weber 2019, 101–102). On first inspection, many of his songs would appear to simply follow the seemingly innocuous characteristics of the rejuvenated folk-like Schlager genre, with its celebration of Austrian culture, including national foods, customs, clothing, and musical instruments (such as the Steirische Harmonika, a diatonic button accordion from Styria). Over the years, though, the singer has alluded to populist tropes such as those mentioned earlier, and has been suspected of having affinities with the far-right political spectrum. This suspicion has been fuelled by Gabalier speaking out publicly in defence of former FPÖ politician Heinz-Christian Strache (Stendel 2015), and attacking gender equality politics, which he referred to as "gender madness" (Weber 2019, 99) in a discussion about Austria's national anthem (Dunkel et al. 2021; Weber 2019, 100–101). Overall, however, explicit self-positioning via public and musical statements in favour of far-right parties is rare in the Austrian case. Some musicians even publicly distance themselves from populist far-right politics, whilst their music may still be heard at FPÖ campaign events. In fact, this ambivalence is central to the politicisation of music in Austrian popular music cultures (see Doehring and Ginkel in this volume).

These uses of music by populist actors and musicians notwithstanding, this book, thirdly, furthers the claim that music does not necessarily need to be used by politicians or musicians-turned-political actors in order to be populist. On the contrary, we regard populism as a dimension of various cultural and musical practices that can become relevant depending on different factors, such as the combination of music with lyrics and other media, social contexts, situative circumstances, and subjective predispositions (Street 2012). If the question of whether or not music can be populist depends on the uses to which it is put by audiences, then musical populism can occur at different levels that do not necessarily involve populist politicians or political movements. Indeed, the ways in which music becomes populist may depend on the individual recipient actively imbuing it with a populist political function. This reliance on the listener does not, however, mean that musical materials and performances are irrelevant to the question of politicisation. Rather, musical performances may afford certain kinds of politicisation and preclude others. As such, a music video that humorously pits a healthy but poor younger generation against a polarised older one – such as in the case of "Wake Up" by the Italian singer Rocco Hunt – would seem likely to resonate with populist discourses, depending on whether or not listeners make this association (for a discussion of Hunt, see Caiani and Padoan in this volume). The song's politicisation as populist, then, depends in large part on the way in which it is actively received.

Whether we are focusing on politicians, musicians, or recipients more generally, populism relies on two main conceptual ways of investing the notion of the people with meaning through music. The first draws on music to frame and solidify the people as a positively defined community. This can be achieved by celebrating that which many regard as their own: an idea of a national culture, for instance, including food, songs, sport, habits, and all sorts of cultural practices that can be framed as communal. In populist discourses, an understanding of the people is usually communicated with reference to lowbrow cultural matters with a class component, such as ostensibly bad manners and working-class tastes (Moffitt 2020; Peck 2019; Erez 2022). Since populism tends to occur in connection with other discourses such as nationalism, these aspects are often accompanied by references to a people's would-be national character, and features of their homeland.

Besides this definition of the people via positive communal characteristics, a second way in which the concept is solidified in populism is via an *ex negativo* process, by which the people are constructed as precisely non-elite. The antagonism that is therefore set up between the people and the elite then helps to co-constitute the people. Hence, the people and the elite should both be understood as epistemologically relational concepts. From a musical perspective, this often entails associations with certain musical genres and related taste worlds that correspond to social class, social groups, and social distinctions (Bourdieu 1984; Dunkel and Schiller 2022). In Poland, for instance, the PiS (Law and Justice) party actively endorses and promotes the genre disco polo, deemed lowbrow (Łuczaj 2020), harnessing this genre-specific authenticity to declare itself in line with the true Polish people (Zienkiewicz 2021). In turn, musical attacks against the elite function as an othering mechanism that both defines and emotionally charges a shared group identity, casting the people as antagonistic to the elite. Moreover, common scenarios of cultural threat may also serve as *ex negativo* reinforcements of the people's identity. The German far-right populist AfD, for instance, has used recordings of muezzin singing to stoke people's indignation about the potential approval of a mosque being constructed in their home district (Dunkel 2020; Ginkel et al. 2023).

By tying the confrontation of socially defined groups to musical experiences, populist performances have the power to reach beyond the merely cognitive. Rather, they can reach people at the level of affect and emotion. As a practice that is tied to group experience, music has the power to create "communities of feeling" (Berezin 2002, 39). This is particularly significant when it comes to a discourse such as populism, which relies on the construction and performance of meaningful group identities and on the separation between a people and its Other. Populist performances, therefore, can afford a sense of group belonging and identity on multiple levels.

Following a culture-oriented approach that is based on the above theoretical premises, the chapters in this book seek to answer the following questions: (1) How are populism and popular music culture connected in contemporary Europe? (2) How does popular music culture afford the mainstreaming and

normalisation of populism in specific European contexts? (3) What is specific about popular music in these contexts? (4) How do people relate to popular music in these contexts?

Popular music and the rise of populism in Europe: Five case studies

To address these questions whilst taking into account the wide range of populisms, diverse political and social contexts, and differences in (national) music cultures, the chapters in this book employ a multiple opportunity structure analysis to contextualise the interconnections between popular music and populism in their various cases.

The concept of a multiple opportunity structure (MOS) was developed to examine the rise of social movements by studying both the institutional structure and dominant political culture within a specific polity – generally a state, but also supranational polities such as the EU (Sperling 2015). The core tenet is that the constraints and opportunities faced by emerging social movements are determined by the "openness" of the political system under which they seek to operate (Meyer 2004). The MOS allows us to observe the multiplicity of opportunities and constraints across several dimensions: the political opportunity structure primarily illuminates the configuration of power within institutionalised politics, whilst the cultural opportunity structure takes into account how a dominant political culture influences or shuts down such opportunities. Finally, there is the discursive opportunity structure, which has been described as "determining which ideas are considered 'sensible', which constructions of reality are seen as 'realistic', and which claims are held as 'legitimate' within a certain polity at a specific time" (Koopmans and Statham 1999, 228). To support our study of the role of popular music in connection with populism, we add a musical opportunity structure to the above. This includes aspects such as developments in the music market (such as digitisation or the changing role of gatekeepers) or shifts in music production, consumption, tastes, and what is considered to belong to the popular mainstream or a (radical) subculture.

Whilst the use of the MOS in social movement studies is based on the assumption that activists and movement organisations face both barriers and opportunities, and will design their tactics accordingly, the concept has also proven fruitful when it comes to disentangling the political, cultural, and discursive structures that determine whether or not particular ideologies are embraced and upheld (Sperling 2015, 47–48). In this sense, the authors in this volume draw on the MOS to determine the opportunities for and obstacles to political populism in their respective countries. Although we do believe that differences at the national level matter and demand different ways of investigating the nexus between popular music and populism, we are nevertheless highly wary of inferring causal explanations for the rise of populism simply from a comparison of country cases. In a nutshell, the concept of a multiple opportunity structure allows the authors to explain why

their investigations into different national case studies take different forms. This grounded approach also allows for comparisons of specific populist phenomena between countries, thus revealing a number of transnational commonalities across the diverse range of places and populisms represented.

All of the chapters in this volume are informed by ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation at events such as party rallies, demonstrations, festivals, and concerts (both online and offline), as well as informal conversations and formal interviews with audiences and fans. This qualitative approach necessitates the researchers to engage in ongoing critical reflection regarding their positionality in relation to their research subjects. Particularly when researching such dynamic and polarised fields as contemporary populist politics and culture, self-awareness regarding personal and social backgrounds, political convictions, and worldviews via-à-vis the research subjects is crucial to avoid (simplistic) normative conclusions (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Zenker and Kumoll 2010). The fact that all of the researchers hold PhDs from and are employed by state-funded European universities is all the more relevant given the widespread scepticism towards cultural elites and state-funded higher education institutions within certain populist groups. Since all of the chapters in this book are concerned with the ongoing processes of normalisation and mainstreaming of populisms, much sensitivity has been required to understand the contemporary "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977) within and behind meanings that may not be fully articulated (yet), that may be invisible or only implicit in current discursive struggles over cultural hegemony and the mobilisation of emotions and affects by populist actors.

With this in mind, it is important to note that not only do the kinds of populism in the different national contexts differ, but so too do the positions of each chapter's authors. Mario Dunkel and Reinhard Kopanski, writing about Germany, and Manuela Caiani and Enrico Padoan, writing about Italy, for instance, all grew up in their countries of enquiry and are deeply embedded in their local contexts. Meanwhile, André Doehring and Kai Ginkel, writing about Austria, Melanie Schiller, writing about Sweden, and Emília Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják, writing about Hungary, take on more hybrid positions: in the case of Hungary, Patakfalvi-Czirják has a Transylvanian (Romanian) minority upbringing, and Doehring and Ginkel have German backgrounds but have been living in Austria for several years. This hybridity is even more pronounced in the Swedish case: Schiller is German and currently based in the Netherlands, although she had previously lived in Sweden for long periods, she had to travel and immerse herself anew in the national contexts and language for this project. All authors benefitted from White privilege (although coming from different socio-economic backgrounds with varying degrees of precarity) during their research. In addition to being able-bodied, this made access to those cultural spaces coded as (exclusively) White not only possible but also relatively safe (albeit daunting and uncomfortable at times). On the other hand, as many of the social spaces discussed in this book are associated with masculinist discourses and their corresponding

behaviours and cultural codes, uneasy situations were – for female researchers in particular – not uncommon during fieldwork.

The chapters in this book are particularly interested in how popular music plays a role in the articulation and mobilisation of collective affects and populist meanings as ways of mainstreaming populist politics. To study this process, they draw on musicological group analyses (MGA) as a method for analysing the specific popular music case studies identified as relevant in each context. As highlighted by Doehring and Ginkel (2022), the MGA, in which researchers analyse music together in groups of two to five peers, is particularly useful for understanding "the relationship between *meanings* that listeners ascribe to a piece of music and its *sonic structures* in a specific social and cultural setting" (Doehring and Ginkel, forthcoming, emphasis in original). As the case studies are analysed in groups with a number of music experts rather than by an individual researcher, this interactive method enables a focus on patterns of collective and inter-subjective interpretation as well as (shared) embodied listening experiences. This allows the researchers to investigate potential populist affordances in their interactions with the material (such as a song's instrumentation, or its harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and sonic elements), the lyrics (in, for example, the rhetoric trope of a righteous people versus a corrupt elite), and audiovisual material such as music videos (images, performance style, and so on). By engaging in this form of self-reflexivity, the analysing group can achieve a deeper understanding of the song under study and its potential uses in populist contexts, as well as how its structures may evoke certain ideas and affects in the reception process (Doehring and Ginkel 2022).

This book brings together a collection of studies – both theoretical and empirical – that look at a wide range of populist articulations in and through music in contemporary Europe. Its five chapters offer detailed analyses of the nexus of popular music and populism in Hungary, Italy, Austria, Sweden, and Germany. These countries have all experienced a substantial increase in populist parties and movements over the last few years, played a major role in shaping EU immigration policy, and seen significant interactions between populism and popular music. Whilst populist authoritarianism has become hegemonic in Hungary since the change of political regime in 2010, with the election of Fidesz' Viktor Orbán as prime minister, Italy was governed by two populist parties (the radical right populist League and the syncretic M5S) between 2018 and 2019. More recently, syncretic populist parties in Italy have lost ground to a populist far-right coalition consisting of the FDI, League, and Forza Italia (the former party of Berlusconi), which has held the political reins since 2022. In Austria, the far-right populist FPÖ was part of the national government in the 1980s, the 2000s, and then again between 2017 and 2019. After a short dent in popular support in the wake of the Ibiza corruption scandal (see Doehring and Ginkel in this volume), the party has regained momentum. In Germany and Sweden, meanwhile, far-right populists have made substantial electoral gains, and both AfD and the SD have gained an unprecedented number of seats in parliament in recent elections. However, whilst the AfD has been excluded

from government coalitions and clearly positions itself as oppositional, the SD has gained significant influence supporting a conservative minority government following 2022's national elections. In addition to this increase in popularity of genuinely populist (and often far-right) parties, it is worth noting that some established parties, such as the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), have adopted populist and right-wing populist strategies as well.

The chapters in this book highlight different aspects of how popular music functions in the renegotiation of populist discourses and hegemony in different contexts. On one hand, populist actors draw on popular music in their attempts to performatively construct an antagonism between the people and certain Others, the elite in particular. The chapter on the nexus of popular music and populism in Hungary, for instance, looks at the interaction between increasingly hegemonic populism and wider cultural shifts by investigating how populist discourses are mobilised in popular music and engaged with by listeners. As Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják show, populist discourse has become a central feature of popular culture in the context of the Orbán regime. Populism not only influences pro-government narratives, however, but also shapes oppositional and even anti-establishment discourses. By identifying and discussing a wide array of populist performances that range from (1) mainstream songs that support Fidesz's hegemonic populism and (2) anti-government protest songs to (3) articulations of anti-elitism in contemporary Hungarian popular music, they investigate how an important part of Fidesz's hegemony-building has been the restructuring of culture and media policy, as well as funding and sponsorship opportunities for artists. Their analysis shows that pro-government songs help to create a cultural, affective, and collective social environment in which political projects are readily accepted, and that consent is manufactured through both the aesthetics and consumption of popular music. According to Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják, the populist discourses of the Fidesz government aim to symbolically construct and represent a middle class by performing the cultural attributes associated with it and projecting a shared, middlebrow taste as the prevailing norm. This is, in other words, what the authors describe as the "middle-classification" of radical right-wing symbolic imagery.

Italy has often been framed as something of a laboratory for populism, with the rise of Silvio Berlusconi (once a singer and writer of popular songs), following the Tangentopoli corruption scandal, during the early-to-mid 1990s. Berlusconi in particular was an early example of what we would now call a European centre-right populist. Over the last thirty years, Italy has seen a diversity of populist movements and parties achieve short-term and medium-term electoral success, including the M5S, the League, and the FDI. Caiani and Padoan's chapter on the Italian context looks at how popular music affords identification with populist identities in highly divergent political contexts (nativist, culturally conservative, anti-establishment, or participatory), but also more broadly in popular culture. As the authors argue, popular music is highly significant in Italian culture, where it serves as an arena for cultural and political discourse. To assess the ways in which popular music culture has

contributed to the mainstreaming of populism in Italy, Caiani and Padoan apply a mixed methods approach, combining musicological group analysis and interviews with an online data mining of specific significant keywords. On the one hand, they discuss how music has interacted with party politics and show how populist parties such as the M5S have cultivated what they call a "rocker" party image that seems both limiting and conducive to electoral success, as well as how individual politicians have used music to position themselves within the cultural field. On the other hand, they emphasise the ways in which mainstream popular music, regardless of its explicit appropriation by politicians, can serve as a site for political projections and negotiations as collective identities that afford populist uses – the concept of Italianness (*italianità*), for instance – are performed and interpreted.

Similarly, Doehring and Ginkel's chapter on popular music and populism in Austria focuses on wider cultural shifts in today's society in the context of contemporary populism, with its resurgence of nationalism, notions of traditionalism, and emphasis on rural and Alpine Austrian national identity. The authors identify stylistic musical hybrids with elements of schlager music, rock, and country that are played at populist radical right events and that make strong references to Austrian identity as specifically rural and Alpine. In contrast to urban settings, this identification is conceived as a culturally uniform realm tied to tradition, marked by gender segregation, and characterised by suspicion of the new and foreign. In particular, Doehring and Ginkel's reading of the politically ambiguous Austropop songs "I Am from Austria" by Reinhard Fendrich (1989) and S.T.S.'s "Fürstenfeld" (1984) at populist radical right rallies held by the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and folk festivals highlights the importance of examining the specific socio-material conditions of reception involved in the process of politicising popular music towards a populist construction of the people. The chapter stresses the performativity at the work in constructions of a nationalist homeland in the sense of a rural Alpine heartland (Taggart 2000), and highlights how populist notions of home are enacted through popular music.

Schiller's chapter on Sweden takes the populist radical right SD party's production and dissemination of popular songs and performances as a starting point for understanding the party's engagement with popular culture so as to articulate populist cultural politics on the one hand, and rearticulate popular national culture in populist-nationalist terms on the other. With the leader of the SD playing in a rock band – Bedårande Barn – that performs regularly at party events and sells CDs, DVDs, and merchandise with an active online presence on social media, the connection between populist party politics and cultures of populism is obvious. By analysing three specific songs as case studies, the chapter shows how the SD mainstream their political discourses by aesthetically and discursively "popifying" radical nationalism and by performing what Schiller conceptualises as "heroic averageness": the paradoxical articulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses in their cultural and musical expressions. As Schiller argues, the SD's performance of heroic averageness allows them to politicise a certain performative commonness, which they then elevate to a heroic defence of national culture and a

revolt against the left-liberal establishment's ostensible cultural hegemony in Sweden's ongoing culture wars.

Finally, the German case study looks at musicians and celebrities as potentially right-wing, populist performers. By analysing performances and practices of reception regarding two major popular music acts – Andreas Gabalier and Xavier Naidoo – Dunkel and Kopanski highlight, in particular, how live music settings such as concerts function to mainstream right-wing and far-right populism on an affective level. Based on participant observation at concerts and MGAs, the chapter argues that Gabalier and Naidoo exemplify two different ways in which right-wing and far-right populism is mainstreamed in celebrity music culture. Whilst Gabalier presents himself as a voice of the people, legitimising far-right populist frames and combining neotraditional aesthetics with a modern sound that draws on African American genres such as swing, blues, and soul, and the country music-inspired sounds of the cultural far-right in the US, Naidoo alternates between what could be described as two different personas. Naidoo's mainstream persona refrains from public political statements, and rather embodies artistry and sophistication. This persona is staged at concerts, on Naidoo's official website, and in his mainstream media appearances, for instance as a jury member of a highly popular talent show. At the same time, Naidoo's underground persona, visible on social media including Telegram, in selected interviews, and in some of Naidoo's songs, expresses extremist and far-right views and caters to far-right audiences. At times, these personas interact and merge, but, as Dunkel and Kopanski argue, Naidoo's strategy of using two different personas has largely allowed him to cultivate both mainstream and far-right audiences. Appreciated by those in the political mainstream as well as in far-right milieus, Naidoo occupies a unique cultural position in the mainstreaming of far-right populism in Germany and German-speaking countries.

Overall, the chapters presented here argue that studying the nexus of popular music and populism offers a unique illumination of significant aspects relating to both the recent rise of populism in Europe and developments in European popular music cultures. They do so by combining a range of insights into the ways in which popular music and populism interact in specific contexts, emphasising structural and historical conditions (that is, the prevailing Multiple Opportunity Structures), the use of music by politicians and political organisations, the role of (celebrity) musicians as political actors, and the politics of music reception as a creative process. Taking into account data from participant observations, individual interviews, group interviews, musicological group analyses, and online research, the chapters draw on a rich variety of sources to explore popular music as an important element of the contemporary cultures of populism. They then build on this theoretical and methodological basis to investigate how populism – and major related discourses such as (ethno-)nationalism and nativism – are normalised and mainstreamed in different European cultures and societies. In doing so, they not only contribute to a better understanding of the rise of populism in Europe as a cultural phenomenon, but also offer a fresh perspective on an important yet under-researched facet in the study of European popular music cultures.

Notes

1 Early drafts of this introduction were co-authored by Anna Schwenck, who had to step back during the writing process due to other commitments. We would like to thank Anna for her great work and expertise (especially regarding the "Multiple Opportunity Structure"). In addition, we would like to thank everyone who contributed to the research consortium "Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe" as well as the Volkswagen Foundation for their generous support of this project.
2 It was only revealed later that the teenager had been following a right-wing extremist ideology. In fact, the large majority of those killed in the attack were people of colour (Bernstein, 2018).
3 Our translation. "Es ist traurig genug, dass man sich überhaupt Gedanken machen muss, ob man an Tagen wie diesen noch auf Konzerte geht, ob man noch außer Haus geht, ob man irgendwo, irgendwie noch in die Öffentlichkeit geht [cheers, Gabalier pauses]. Das ist ziemlich bitter, weil wir eigentlich eine sehr, sehr fröhliche und gesellige Kultur sind, wir Österreicher genauso wie ihr Deutschen, und, und, was will ich jetzt sagen? Alles, was ich mir denk', das sag ich einfach lieber nicht, weil, weil ich auf euch aufpassen muss. Aber eines kann ich noch sagen: Es freut mich so gewaltig, dass ihr heute da seid. Und es freut mich, dass ihr auch einen jungen Steirerbuam aus Österreich so nehmt, wie er ist, der ab und zu auch mal sagt, was er sich denkt, weil es immer noch schöner ist, trotz aller dieser Sorgen, die das Land momentan mit sich bringt, hier bei euch da in Germany, und auch wir bei uns zu Hause in Österreich. Es ist eine große Herausforderung, der wir uns momentan stellen müssen, und [pause]. Na, mehr sag ich nicht" (oachkotzlschwoaf 2016).
4 The number of handbooks and general introductions that endeavour to chart populism has increased exponentially over the last years. The 2017 *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017) was followed by the *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* in 2018 (Torre 2018). The *Edward Elgar Research Handbook of Populism* (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis) is currently in preparation. Similarly, numerous general introductions to populism have recently appeared. Jan-Werner Müller's *What Is Populism?* (Müller 2016) was followed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), Manuel Anselmi's *Populism: An Introduction* (Anselmi 2018), Pierre Rosanvallon's *Le siècle du populisme* (Rosanvallon 2020), and Benjamin Moffitt's *Populism* (Moffitt 2020), to name only a handful of the most visible monographs on the topic. In addition, Brill launched the academic journal *Populism* in 2018 as a platform for a wide variety of research into populism.
5 Literally 'fighting term,' i.e. a term used primarily to attack a political opponent.
6 See for instance the chapter division by region in Part II of the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017).
7 As Cas Mudde points out, far-right parties increased their presence in the European Parliament again in the 2019 European elections, as they had in the elections of 2009 and 2014 (Mudde 2010).
8 According to Tony Bennett, hegemony involves "moral, cultural, intellectual, and, thereby, political leadership over the whole of society" (Bennett 1998, 220).
9 For a discussion of the relationship between popular culture and populism from a cultural studies perspective, see Dunkel and Schiller 2022.
10 By populist actors or populists, we refer to individuals or political institutions that actively participate in the articulation and dissemination of populist discourses in society, in the realms of both politics and media, but also in culture at large. This may include political parties, movements or associations, and politicians, as well as celebrities, artists, bands and musicians, and fans and audiences.

11 Jacques Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière 2004, 12). Thus, "[t]he distribution of the sensible [. . .] produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done" (Rancière 2004, 85).
12 Our translation. "Der Rechtspopulismus ist damit nicht nur Parteipolitik, er betreibt eine Politik der Ideen mit dem Ziel einer kulturellen Hegemonie" (Reckwitz 2020, 413–414).
13 There is an ongoing debate amongst political theorists on the nature of populism and nationalism, with some arguing that they are inextricably interwoven and others advocating for their conceptual separation. Most scholars agree, however, that populism and nationalism tend to be interconnected on an empirical level. See the debate between Rogers Brubaker and De Cleen and Stavrakakis in *Nations and Nationalism* (Brubaker 2020; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2020).
14 As Herschinger et al. highlight, theories of social radicalisation must also account for individual agency, taking into consideration radicalising individuals or groups, who in turn polarise society and create a climate conducive to radicalisation (Herschinger et al. 2020). As a result, "significant socio-political changes such as growth in extremist views among the middle of society" lead to "a reduction of social cohesion as polarization leads to hostile confrontations between extremist individuals, groups, milieus and social layers as well as between proponents of non-radicalized positions" (12).
15 We use musicking in Christopher Small's sense here as a term that encompasses all kinds of music-related activity, including listening and moving to music (see Small 1998).

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1

POPULIST DISCOURSES IN PRO-GOVERNMENT, ANTI-GOVERNMENT, AND ANTI-ELITE SONGS IN HUNGARY UNDER THE ORBÁN REGIME

Emília Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják

Introduction

This chapter looks at the relationship between populism and popular music in Hungary after the political turn of 2010, the era often referred to as the Orbán regime. Our aim is to explore the ways in which popular music enables, facilitates, or challenges the spread of populist discourses, and how this is related to musical aesthetics and form as well as musicians' economic, social, and political embeddedness. The assertion of political power over and through popular music may involve controlling the institutions of musical production, dissemination, and consumption through cultural policy, financing, sponsorship, or media policy (Cloonan and Street 1997). Meanwhile, (popular) music can itself play a part in solidifying political power and facilitating the process of hegemony building, through its ability to address social groups via processes of identification linked to musical style and taste (Frith 1996), and establish feelings of community through lived experiences.

Populist discourses are designed to create, address, and represent 'the people' according to a polarising logic that posits a corrupt elite against everyone else, 'us' against 'them.' In right-wing populism, these polarities are completed with characteristic discursive elements such as patriotism, narratives of crisis, and a conflict between so-called foreign interests and national ones. After the regime change of 1989–90, populism emerged as the dominant discourse of Hungary's right-wing elite, emphasising the "emotional unity of the 'national interest' and the protection against the interests of international capital" (Gagyi 2014, 306). This chapter, however, explores populism as an ideological pillar in the hegemony building of Viktor Orbán's "System of National Cooperation" (NER) regime (Éber et al. 2019; Gramsci 1971), a political turn from 2010 that followed in the wake of 2008's economic crisis. In this context, we look at how mainstream pop songs have paved

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the way for, as well as attempted to challenge, the right-wing populist ideology of post-2010 Hungarian governments. Our inquiry is critical of culturalist explanations that would connect the erosion of liberal democracy or democratic culture with some kind of Central or Eastern European nationalism, the lack of a strong civil society, or the needs and mentality of the masses (for a detailed critique, see e.g., Hann 2020). Instead, we argue that the regime in place since 2010 has created, both structurally and discursively, new lines of division and distinction at a national level, thus contributing to a redefinition of national identity, national interest, and sovereignty. These then serve to underpin some elements of the governing Fidesz party's politics, and obscure others.

We begin by outlining the economic and political context of Hungary's post-2010 governments, and the ways in which populism can be understood in relation to this local political regime. The second section provides an overview of the relationship between this regime and popular music, shaped as it is through cultural and media policy, financing, and sponsorship. In the third section, we take a political economic approach to interpreting local processes, focussing on the embeddedness of Hungary's popular music market within international flows of capital and global digitalised music industries.[1] The fourth section details our research methodology, a Musicological Group Analysis of songs and corresponding videos, as well as fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews.

These are then followed by our song analyses, which we divide into three main – and imperfectly homogenous – groups of songs and artists distinguished according to their political stance and political economic aspects such as financing, as well as various combinations of state, government, and market dependence. We show how populist discourse has become a central ideology and source of legitimation in popular culture as much as political speech, shaping not only pro-government but also oppositional, and even anti-establishment, discourses. Within popular Hungarian music, therefore, artists and songs that assume a political position either align themselves with or adjust to the hegemonic populist discourse.

Populism and Hungary's post-2010 political regime

Orbán's regime, in power since 2010, has been defined as "radical right-wing populism" (Müller 2016; Wodak 2019) and "paternalist populism" (Enyedi 2015) in analyses focussing on political discourses, or as "authoritarian capitalism" (Scheiring 2021) following a political economic approach. For our part, we view it as "a local hegemony established in the post-2008 phase of the crisis of the global economic cycle" (Éber et al. 2019, 29)[2], which simultaneously serves Western capital with labour whilst strengthening national capital and a national bourgeoisie (Éber et al. 2019). The populist discourses at the core of this chapter underpin some elements of politics and governance post-2010, and render others invisible. The idea of national unity and pride, articulated in a right-wing framework to affirm the moral superiority of the Hungarian people against liberal

(Western) Europe, obscures both Hungary's susceptibility to Western European (predominantly German) capital – to which Orbán's regime has subjugated labour rights and vocational training (Éber et al. 2019, 50) – and the "new geopolitics of indebtedness" (Gagyi and Gerőcs 2022), which sees Orbán position Hungary as a gateway to the EU for Russian and Chinese investment. Despite these dependencies, Hungary's post-2010 governments have emphasised the defence of so-called traditional, Christian European values in the face of Western Europe's pro-immigration policies. The structural disadvantages of Hungarian workers in the EU have contributed to social insecurity and undermined the belief, prominent since the regime change, in the possibility of 'catching up' with the West. In right-wing discourses, this is typically framed as a lament for, or anger about, Hungary's status as a humiliated nation and second-rate EU member. From 2010, the government adopted this rhetoric, all the while continuing to reinforce Hungary's position as a provider of cheap labour within the EU.

Systematic transformations in social policy have meant the redistribution of welfare allowances in favour of middle-class families, while simultaneously subjugating and dominating other groups (Éber et al. 2019, 29). Fidesz's view of society then underpinned its so-called workfare regime, announced in 2014 (Szombati 2018, 154–164). This regime distinguished between useful, productive, and hard-working citizens – the people – and useless citizens – others. Those who lost out in the new redistribution – the racialised lower classes, those living in precarious conditions (demonised and criminalised as homeless), those in need of social assistance, refugees (again, strongly racialised), single mothers, and sexual minorities were symbolically marked out and denounced. As Ágnes Gagyi and Tamás Gerőcs put it: "Ideological campaigns against women's rights, Roma, migrants, and the homeless were paired with conciliatory messages praising honest work and promises of a new middle-class development" (2022, 121). The gender politics of post-2010 governments have involved pronatalist support for middle-class families through tax policies and loans linked to childbearing (Csányi 2019, 132–135), which has also strengthened the class divide. Ideologically, such measures were built upon concerted attacks on so-called gender ideology, identified as an external, Western influence; emphasis was instead placed on the restoration of 'traditional' gender roles – in particular motherhood for women – and families (Csányi 2019).

Theories of populism have suggested that at the core of populist politics is a constitutive dichotomy, which can be traced back to a distinction between an oppressed people and an elite that ignores the former's demands and needs (Mudde 2007). Populist leadership is understood to make its demands on behalf of this oppressed majority, which cannot be realised in the prevailing political, economic, and cultural system because the voice of the majority does not reach decision-makers. Both the basis and goal of populist politics is to construct this dichotomy, imbue it with cultural and social meaning, and manufacture a consensus around it in the political arena. Hungary's populist leadership is hegemonic; nevertheless, its rhetoric is oppositional, and it continues to make claims on behalf of an oppressed

majority. In other words, the government posits an unequal opposition between, on one side, the morally corrupt leaders that came before them and a discredited liberal intellectual elite who serve Western interests, and on the other, 'we, the Hungarian people,' a common sense majority. In this formulation, the former group are considered to hold more power. The role of the strong leader in populism is therefore to engage in a struggle with the enemy on behalf of an oppressed, "silent majority" (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 391; Taggart 2000, 93), restoring their moral integrity and even defending European civilisation altogether (Brubaker 2017).

Rogers Brubaker emphasises the intersection at which populist demands are located: between the politics of inequality and identity politics. Here, the question of who is deserving, or "who gets what," becomes constitutively entwined with "who is what" (Brubaker 2020). For this reason, nationalist narratives are joined to populist goals in the articulation of demands. In Hungary, the supposed oppression of the Hungarian people and nation, their economic dependence both globally and within the EU, and the lack of solidarity towards the people of Hungary are held up in images of abandonment and condescension, then articulated in political communication (c.f. Toplišek 2019, 394). Brubaker (2020, 54) argues that in populist rhetoric, these claims are attached to the redistribution not only of resources or opportunities, but of respect and recognition. He emphasises that when the people are defined in opposition to an economic, political, and cultural elite, this is based on a discursive separation between decent working people – who are unable to support their families and who represent normality and common sense – and a rich, isolated, thriving elite who have access to quality education and who not only exploit the oppressed but also differ from them in terms of their culture, habits, and values (Brubaker 2020, 11). Moreover, this axis runs not only between the elite and 'normal' people, but also between those taken to embody normality and those 'below.' Indeed, the distinction between normal people with decent jobs who work and struggle to support their families, and a deviant underclass living on benefits, unable to catch up and integrate, is markedly present in populist rhetoric. In the Hungarian context, as indicated above, these distinctions are intertwined with nationalist discourses and embedded in historical ones. Images of the representatives and servants of international capital are dominated by historically-embedded antisemitic tropes, whilst images of a precarious underclass that has fallen behind are saturated by anti-Roma discourse.

Our critique of such approaches, which focusses primarily on public political discourses, is grounded in a need to take social and class politics into account, and to view the discursive distinctions in Hungary's particular social context. Moreover, it is based on looking at cultural processes – such as taste, genre, and reception of popular culture – to shed light on the way meanings are engaged with and how this engagement may reinforce social and political divisions. To theorise the relationship between popular music and populism, we rely on Pierre Ostiguy's sociocultural perspective (2017). Like Brubaker, Ostiguy demonstrates the operation of populist demands via axes. Besides social and cultural hierarchies, however, his

interpretative framework also tracks right- and left-wing political demands. He describes populist rhetoric as an emotional narrative that appropriates political and mobilising goals in the name of a crowd without representation. Populist leaders seek an emotional bond with their supporters, to then politicise the symbols, as well as the aesthetic and habitual components, of this bond. Ostiguy's examples include conduct deemed unusual for a politician: direct, impolite, or even sexist behaviour, and corresponding language. He terms such performative political gestures a "flaunting of the 'low'" (Ostiguy, 2017).

By viewing taste as a means of community building, the sociocultural approach to populism builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in which taste, as a mode and practice of distinction, serves to maintain and reproduce class relations (Bourdieu 1984). Legitimate taste equals that of the dominant class, while any deviation from this by subordinate classes comes with accusations of vulgarity. In Ostiguy's description of populist politics, the populist leader appears on behalf of the people to embody and legitimise their taste, namely what they consider authentic and characteristic, and what they deem foreign. Defining taste as a practice of distinction can therefore be an especially effective tool in the hands of populist leaders.

Ostiguy's approach is primarily rooted in the experience of the spread of mostly left-wing populisms in South America, where populist leaders strive to address the lower classes, promising social emancipation. In contrast, the goal of right-wing populism in Eastern European countries has tended to be the creation of a new middle class (see e.g., Kiss and Székely (2021) in relation to Romania). We will argue that, given the policies outlined above, the Fidesz government's populist discourses are designed not only to represent but create – through a redistribution of resources and opportunities (Brubaker 2020, 54) – a middle class, as well as perform its cultural characteristics, and present an imagined common taste as the norm (thus the distribution of respect and recognition; Brubaker 2020).

Popular music and the hegemony building of the Orbán regime

The cultural hegemony of the Orbán regime cannot simply be reduced to right-wing conservative ideology. Rather, it should be viewed as a dynamic space in which competing groups (such as professionals and institutions) either align themselves with, reject, declare autonomy from, or are incorporated into the system (see e.g., Nagy and Szarvas 2021). This is especially true of the popular music field, where, as our examples will demonstrate, the industrial production, distribution, and consumption of music, along with efforts to create hits and minimise risk (c.f. Hesmondhalgh 2007, 1–24) have become entangled with politicised stereotypes about social groups and cultural consumption (Csigó 2016). Nevertheless, since 2010, state and government actors have been increasingly successful at channelling changes in the popular music market due to transformations in the global music industries so as to facilitate government influence in the popular music field.

Following the regime change of 1989–1990, Hungary, along with other former socialist countries, entered the global music industries first and foremost as a new market for major labels such as Sony, EMI, or Universal, who operated local subsidiaries during the 1990s (Barna 2021). At the turn of the twenty-first century, emerging forms of digital distribution, especially peer-to-peer file-sharing, led to a temporary but drastic decline in record sales, weakening the major labels' economic power. This was felt even more strongly in Eastern Europe than in the global core, and the recording industry has continued to contract in relation to the live music industry – which in turn has grown both globally (Frith 2007; Brennan and Webster 2011) and locally. Hungarian musicians' primary source of income is now live music (Virág and Főző 2018), and it is mainly there that the state has exerted an increasing influence since 2010. There is, however, also a generational factor in musicians' income structure: older musicians, who began their careers during the socialist period, are typically less able to make effective use of digital platforms through content generation and monetisation. Thanks to their extended back catalogues, however, they earn relatively more through royalties (in 2020, 44% of the top 1% of royalty-earning artists were above the age of 51; Szőnyi and Vörösmarty-Horváth 2021, 15). Younger musicians make less money from recorded music, and typically have to tour extensively as well as market themselves online.

In 2014, the Orbán government launched a programme of direct state support for popular music; initially named the Cseh Tamás Programme (after a well-known singer-songwriter), it was later renamed the Hangfoglaló ("Songquest") Programme. Its main aim is to support artists financially at the beginning of their careers, as well as venues, musical exports (both live and recorded), media, music education, and popular musical heritage. It has provided unprecedented financial and infrastructural resources – such as opportunities to perform, or professional networks – to popular artists and others in the music industry since the regime change. In this sense, the state structure has to an extent replaced those 'traditional' market actors who lost their economic sway following digitisation, particularly record labels. At the same time, due to the typically precarious and insecure status of musicians, music industry workers, and the multitude of small-scale music enterprises, the programme has also led to new relations of dependency. This new pattern of dependency on the market and the state has replaced musicians' once primary and direct exposure to the market, and has seriously impacted musicians' autonomy in terms of political expression.

The government's influence is also visible in the involvement of various associated sectors – such as tourism, event organisation, advertising, and spectator sports – in the music industries, with state companies or corporations close to the government assuming the role of sponsor or operating company. The Hungarian state energy company MVM and the gambling firm Szerencsejáték Zrt., for instance, regularly sponsor music festivals (e.g., Volt festival) and larger concerts. The state-owned Media Services and Support Trust Fund (MTVA) also regularly sponsors talent contests (e.g., Nagyszínpad ("Main stage")) or award ceremonies (e.g., the

Petőfi Music Award) that hold key gatekeeping positions in the popular music field. Furthermore, the state at the local level also plays a hugely important role in popular music, as the majority (60%) of gigs and an even larger number (80%) of festivals are financed by local councils, making them free. Many of the latter are village fairs, town days, or gastronomic festivals (Virág and Főző 2018, 74).

The entanglement of the state support system of popular music and the Orbán regime increased during the Covid-19 crisis, when restrictive measures made musicians, other industry workers, and institutions even more precarious (Barna and Blaskó 2021). During the first lockdown, for instance, MTVA sponsored the Maradj Otthon ("Stay at home") festival, which featured performances live-streamed via social media, and involved artists in the government's pandemic communications to strengthen the "stay at home" message. A symbolic moment in the strengthening of Fidesz's cultural influence was the appointment, in June 2020, of Szilárd Demeter (director of the Petőfi Museum of Literature from 2018) as ministerial commissioner responsible for the renewal of popular music. However, the most spectacular example of government involvement was the so-called Raktárkoncertek ("Warehouse gigs") programme, organised for the summer and autumn of 2020 to help musicians without performance opportunities or income. The programme consisted of recording performances (without an audience) at a warehouse venue and then digitally streaming them, with the participating musicians paid for their contribution. The government commissioned the Hungarian Tourism Agency – an organisation outside of the music industry – to organise the programme, and another company close to the government, Antenna Hungária, to procure the technical equipment. The majority of the 5.3 billion HUF (12.5 million EUR) budget was allocated to Antenna Hungária (Sajó 2020). This indicates that the gradual incorporation of the popular music field – which accelerated significantly during the pandemic to meet the ballooning dependence and vulnerability of musicians and music industry workers – is not only a question of ideological control, but also of resource acquisition.

Methodology

To connect our analysis of musical aesthetics to the broader political and social context discussed here, our approach draws indirectly on the tradition of the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Simpson 1941; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]). Proponents of this critical school contend that the relations of cultural production, cultural labour, and the aesthetic of the cultural product should be interpreted together, as parts of a system. Today, cultural analysis tends to separate these three spheres: critical accounts of cultural labour typically pay little attention to aesthetics, whilst text-based studies are often blind to relations of production and labour. Besides treating the songs as texts, our analysis considers the context of production, dissemination, and performance, which constitute sites for both the music industries' capitalist logic and political power. We argue that lyrics, genre

aesthetics, and compositional features all help to construct particular audiences and affective spaces of reception, as well as create affordances for particular meanings within these affective spaces. Tia DeNora utilises the concept of affordance to make sense of "music's interpretive flexibility" (2004, 43). Far from arbitrary signification, however, this term recognises that music's affordances are constituted within the social circumstances of use, enabling music to function as a resource for world-building (2004, 43–44). Antoine Hennion, moreover, shows how a study of music listening ideally entails a focus on "gestures, objects, mediums, devices, and relations engaged in a form of playing or listening, which amounts to more than the actualization of a taste 'already there,' for they are redefined during the action, with a result that is partly uncertain"; music is, therefore, able to "both engage and form subjectivities" (Hennion 2001, 1). To model and analyse this process, and ultimately understand the relationship between coherence in song structure and the afforded social meanings and subjectivities, we used the method of Musicological Group Analysis (MGA), developed by André Doehring (Appen and Doehring 2017) and described in the introduction to this volume. We organised one group analysis session per song, and involved music experts (a musicologist, a popular music scholar, and a professional musician). We also participated. The method enabled a double perspective; musical analysis on the one hand, and a collective reflection on our own listening on the other, with this second perspective corresponding to DeNora and Hennion's theorisations. We also treated the group sessions as a process for modelling the collective listening situation. This made for a multi-layered analysis: we were able to record our own impressions and experiences and, with the help of experts, to interpret these together through criteria of musical aesthetics, whilst also paying attention to contextual features (Appen and Doehring 2017, 3). We were looking to identify "relationships between the analytical observations and the impressions and idiosyncrasies captured in our initial" – and subsequent – "listening notes" (Appen and Doehring 2017, 5). Moreover, these exercises also functioned as preparation for the analysis of the focus group discussions, and allowed us to make sense of the various listening situations and settings encountered during fieldwork.

For the MGA, we selected thirteen mainstream pop songs (of which this chapter discusses seven), conceptualising 'mainstream' with reference to certain criteria: firstly, the song had to be popular. Measuring the popularity of music – or other cultural products – is a complex issue, due largely to the transformation and diversification of cultural industries through digitisation. In the Hungarian context, there is a discrepancy between chart data based on record sales (which primarily indicate popularity amongst consumers with more conservative consumer habits in terms of format; they prefer CDs), radio play (radio has been competing in recent years with YouTube to be the primary source of music in Hungary (e.g., Virág and Főző 2018, 27; Jakab and Főző 2020, 31), although there is strong competition between retro/nostalgia and new music), YouTube popularity (indicative of the consumption of various social groups), and subscription-based streaming (indicative of the

consumption of relatively high-status groups). Moreover, measuring popularity is complex in view of the social embeddedness of musical taste: not only its classed nature (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), but also the importance of a listening situation to the enjoyment of a song or piece of music. The latter is a consideration generally absent in classic sociologies of music taste, which tend to focus on naming preferred artists or genres, but to which we are particularly attentive here. For instance, the song "Nélküled" (2007) by Ismerős Arcok is regularly sung collectively at events such as wedding parties and football games, even by those who would not necessarily listen to it at home. In light of these complexities, we have had to be attentive to "local knowledges and practices" (Miller 2020) when establishing and applying our criteria.

Secondly, our criteria considered songs according to radio popularity, record sales, popularity on YouTube, and artist's live audience size (indicated by, for instance, sold-out arena gigs), regularity of media presence at time of research, and length of career. Through this process, we selected seven songs.[3] As Table 1.1 indicates,[4] "Hazatalál" ("Finding home") (2018) by Ákos; "Tizenötmillióból egy" ("One of fifteen million") (2017) by Kowalsky meg a Vega; and "Apuveddmeg" ("Daddy buy me [the city]") (2014) by Wellhello meet all or most of the popularity criteria. "Akit a hazája nem szeretett" ("Whom their country did not love") (2018) by János Bródy, and "Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)" ("Don't tell me [there is no hope]") (2016) by Zsuzsa Koncz were selected on the basis of their record sales

TABLE 1.1 Selected songs according to various indicators of popularity

Criteria	*"Hazatalál" "Tizenötmillióból egy"*	*"Apuveddmeg"*	*"Akit a hazája nem szeretett" "Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)"*	*"Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek"*	*"Nélküled"*
radio popularity	●	●			
record sales	●	●	●		
YouTube views	●	●		●	●
lyrics searches	●	●	●	●	●
live audience size	●	●		●	
media presence	●	●		●	●
long career	●		●		●

(indicating an older fan base) and their long-term careers, which began during the period of state socialism. The primary channel for Krúbi's "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek" ("Orbán, jerk off Feri") (2018) is YouTube and streaming platforms, which indicates a younger fan base, combined with sold-out gigs and an active media presence. Fourthly, "Nélküled" ("Without you") (2007) by Ismerős Arcok combines media presence with popularity on YouTube as well as on the major lyrics database Zeneszöveg.hu ("Music lyrics"), which suggests that many learn the song to sing it in various everyday contexts (such as football matches, school ceremonies, or wedding parties).

Our second set of criteria was based on a strong connection to politics (Table 1.2). We included songs with lyrical content addressing political issues. This included songs aligned with Fidesz's post-2010 rhetoric by artists with government support who make public statements endorsing the government ("Nélküled," "Hazatalál," "Tizenötmillióból egy"); as well as songs critical of the government, with varying degrees of directness ("Akit a hazája nem szeretett," "Ne mondd [hogy nincs remény]"); and songs that tie an anti-government position to a more general anti-elite stance ("Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek," "Apuveddmeg"). Indeed, some have been used in political campaigning ("Nélküled") or demonstrations ("Apuveddmeg").

We conducted focus group discussions in eight towns of varying sizes around Hungary (Szeged, Kecskemét, Székesfehérvár, Tatabánya, Debrecen, Pécs, Martfű, and Nagymaros). Each group contained eight participants, who varied in terms of occupation and social background from working- and lower-middle-class to middle-class and intellectual. There were equal numbers of men and women, and the age range was 30–50. We balanced the groups in terms of political stance, with each consisting of a more or less equal number of those who defined themselves as right-leaning, left-leaning, or in the middle, and at least one who was less interested in politics. Only a basic interest in music, as opposed to active fandom, was necessary. The discussions focussed on music consumption habits, local opportunities to listen to music, taste, and the relationship between popular music and politics (e.g., musicians' political statements). Each group then listened to a song and watched

TABLE 1.2 Selected songs according to political stance

Lyrics addressing political issues		
Pro-government	*Anti-government*	*Anti-elite*
"Hazatalál" "Nélküled" "Tizenötmillióból egy"	"Akit a hazája nem szeretett" "Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)"	"Apuveddmeg" "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek"

its official video, which they discussed. For this, we selected three songs from our corpus to enable comparisons between both songs and groups: "Hazatalál," "Tizenötmillióból egy," and "Akit a hazája nem szeretett."

The MGA and focus group sessions were transcribed, coded according to our research questions, and analysed. In line with our interest in listening settings and the performative aspects of songs (c.f. Middleton 1990, 56), we completed these methods with fieldwork conducted at festivals, village days, and other events that featured our chosen artists between 2019 and 2021. Finally, we conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with fans of the artists and other relevant actors, and carried out an analysis of media content related to the songs and artists.

The homeland, the nation, and the family: Mainstream songs supporting Fidesz's hegemonic populism

The first group of songs that we will look at are examples of pro-government popular music. These include songs that tend to align with the hegemonic order and its ideological basis – a relation James Garratt terms "affirmation" (Garratt 2019, 116–117) – by artists that tend to depend, both economically and for infrastructure, on the Orbán regime. "Hazatalál" (2018) by pop-rock artist Ákos Kovács (who performs as Ákos) exemplifies mainstream popular music that supports the government's right-wing populist discourse. Ákos's career, starting with the Depeche Mode-style synthpop act Bonanza Banzai at the end of the 1980s, developed gradually over more than thirty years, during which he managed to establish himself as a successful singer and songwriter. From 2010, however, he has relied increasingly on the government and government-related companies (such as MTVA and Szerencsejáték Zrt.) both economically and symbolically, for commissions, sponsorship, awards, and grants. Parallel to this is his public support for the Fidesz government, whose discourse he reinforces via his public statements, typically in pro-government press outlets founded as part of the regime's media incorporation (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020, 50–52). As such, he has strengthened his image as a conservative public intellectual, to which his creative work outside of popular music, especially in literature – regarded as a more autonomous, 'high cultural' field – contributes. Indeed, his authenticity as an artist is constructed not only through his music, but also this intellectual position: in our interviews, fans of his highlighted the meaningfulness of his lyrics and his commitment to "conveying values"; this, to them, distinguishes him from more commercial artists (despite the fact that he is one of Hungary's highest-earning musicians). In the post-2010 period, Ákos's intellectual role and his alignment with government discourse merged. This is evident, for example, in his conservative view of gender roles: in a 2015 interview, he explained that he does not believe in women's emancipation, and that a woman's task is to fulfil her "female principle" as opposed to competing with men in the labour market (Kadarkai Endre 2015). This statement is very much

in line with a "sacral" view of the family as constituting an important element in the government's "alter-genderism" (Csányi 2019, 128–129), especially prominent from Orbán's third government onwards. In interviews, Ákos regularly refers to conservative and national traditions, along with criticism of the EU, and emphasises supposed differences between East and West, typically framed as the threat of Western liberal trends and a concurrent crisis in values (e.g., Kacsoh 2021).

"Hazatalál" can be described as a patriotic song, which articulates the security of the homeland – experienced on a personal and emotional level – by positing it against an (unidentified) external threat. Ákos himself confirmed that the song is supposed to evoke patriotic emotions in the audience, which, according to him, have been sidelined: "Today it is no longer fashionable to talk about the love of the homeland [. . .] even though the important representatives of Hungarian poetry were patriots" (InfoRádió 2018). Whilst the tradition evoked here is that of nineteenth-century poetry (the song even quotes Mihály Vörösmarty's 1836 poem "Szózat," a second national anthem in Hungary), love for the homeland is articulated through a mainstream, contemporary pop-rock aesthetic. Ákos ties this aesthetic to an anti-systemic stance, which he sees as embedded in a symbolic politics within a global struggle for hegemony. This is associated with a representation of national interests and the preservation of conservative cultural values, defined against liberal ideology: "In our times, the superstructure is the liberal idea of the state and the everyday experience of life derived from the liberal. In my view, if somebody wants to revive the anti-establishment, anti-superstructure attitude of popular or pop or rock music, it is not conservative values that they have to rebel against, since those have not been in power for a long time" (Jani99998 2018).

The song's dynamic opening – which listeners during both the MGAs and the focus groups tended to associate with travelling, or road movies, partly due to the heavy use of reverb – is accompanied by Ákos's pentatonic singing style and an instrumentation that sounds familiar and markedly 'alternative mainstream' to a Hungarian audience. We use the term alternative mainstream to refer to the genre of alternative rock that gained mainstream status in the 2000s, largely thanks to the music festival scene and, from 2007 onwards, the MR2 radio station which supported the genre (Barna 2015). In the first verse of "Hazatalál," the voice is soft and pathos-laden:

> Does the place exist
> Where you need to live and die?
> Which strikes you to the ground and lifts you up
> Where dreams begin
> Where the great traveller
> Can return again and again
> Where mother's words
> Scold and always ask from the heart[5]
>
> ("Ákos - Hazatalál" n.d.)

In the second verse, however, the voice becomes stronger and more threatening, the articulation harder, and the lyrics more serious:

> This may be the age
> When the excess finally boils over
> The mainstream is furious
> Its mood is grave
> Because the wind is turning
> And the streams are all afresh
> It is no wonder that those
> Not quite innocent are in fear
> (“Ákos - Hazatalál” n.d.)

Although a specific enemy is not identified, the second verse speaks of a crisis and draws a clear line between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ (those that are guilty).

An upward scale in the main melody leads, at its peak, to a pause, and then to the song’s main refrain (which fulfils a bridge function in the structure): “Those who find a home are happy.” The same melodic scale is repeated, downward, with this part slowing the rushed tempo of the verse – the melody also finds its home. While the verse, both lyrically and sonically, creates affordances (DeNora 2004) for urgency – suggesting a sense of crisis – the bridge implies arrival. Indeed, the song’s video emphasises the theme of arrival, highlighting a national dimension of home by presenting a traditionally Hungarian landscape (Ákos 2018b). Featuring some of Hungary’s best-known natural and built attractions, shown through extreme long shots (in black and white for added artistic heft), the video’s aesthetic is that of a tourist campaign or country film (and echoes the Hungarian Tourism Agency’s role in the Hungarian music industry). Participants in the focus group tended to interpret this imagery as too direct and even propagandistic – as opposed to the vaguer sense of arriving home conveyed by the song.

Although articulated in relatively general terms, it is easy to connect the song’s patriotism, sense of crisis, and accompanying logic of polarisation – positing good against bad – to the much more directly racialised anti-immigration political climate. Ákos’s public persona, demonstrated in some of his statements as discussed above, only facilitates this connection further. Moreover, the aesthetic of “Hazatalál” establishes a connection between nationalism and an imagined middle class: as opposed to a “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy 2017), here we find musical and visual elements (professionally produced radio-friendly pop-rock, light road movie vibe, black and white photography) that speak to a middle-class audience. This corresponds with the Orbán regime’s class politics: strengthening a well-off middle class whilst subjugating and dominating the lower classes.

Our second example in this category, “Nélküled” (“Without you”) (2007) by the band Ismerős Arcok, exemplifies how music originating from the radical right has achieved mainstream popularity in the “national rock” genre (Feischmidt and Pulay 2017) through a combination of political instrumentalisation and cultural

industry processes.[6] The song's trajectory also illustrates the ways in which the Fidesz government appropriated nationalist symbols and a system of references developed within a pre-2010 radical right-wing subculture, which they then incorporated into their populist discourse as part of their political strategy. This process of appropriation further cemented the connection between populism and nationalism in Fidesz's post-2010 hegemony building. "Nélküled" offers a rich case study, and we will here highlight the ways in which the song's consecration (Bourdieu 1993) by the regime relies on the idea of national unity with an emphasis on the oneness of all ethnic Hungarians as well as a performance of diversity within unity through the inclusion of Roma musicians.

Recorded in 2007, "Nélküled" resonated with the radical right whose view of the nation is as a kind of blood kinship, as well as with radical right-wing movements that were targeting an increasingly deprived lower-middle and working class. This mobilisation was grounded in a symbolic distinction between, on the one hand, Hungarians living in Hungary and neighbouring countries as belonging to the nation, and on the other, those considered undeserving of such belonging, Roma people in particular. The two most prominent lines in the song are: "Whatever may happen, while we live and until we die/We are of one blood"[7] ("Ismerős Arcok - Nélküled" n.d.). The first of these lines begins on the song's highest note, and is thus melodically highlighted. Formulated as a kind of pledge, the change to "we" from the second person singular of the preceding verses signifies a community bound "by blood." The song's popularisation and endorsement by the Fidesz government after 2010, however, not only preserved these connotations, but lifted "Nélküled" from its relatively narrow subcultural context and made it a widely used symbol of national unity.

The original recording, the final song on the album *Éberálom* ("Lucid dream") (2007), is a rock ballad featuring just piano and vocals. The single male voice is raw and gives the impression of an untrained singer, corresponding to Ismerős Arcok's early biker-rock subcultural credentials. The band's professionalisation away from its avowed subcultural status came with an aesthetic elevation, which included the re-recording of the song twice, each time with an orchestral arrangement: first in 2013 for the album *Ezer évnek egy reménye* ("One hope for a thousand years"), and then as part of a twentieth anniversary orchestral album released in 2019 titled *Egy vérből valók vagyunk* ("We are of one blood" – a reference to the well-known line). At the same time, the cultural consecration (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]) of the band itself took place through both symbolic – such as state prizes – and material means: financing, prominent performance opportunities, and visibility. From the band's perspective, the popularisation and consecration of "Nélküled" heralded the establishment of a successful career in the music industries.

In 2019, an all-star orchestral version of "Nélküled" was included in Zoltán Mága's New Year concert programme (Maga Zoltan 2019), a yearly event that features classical music, opera arias, cabaret, and popular Gypsy music (*cigányzene*), boasting over 500 performing artists. The aesthetic consecration of "Nélküled"

during this performance did not erase its symbols of racial and ethnic unity, which served as the foundation for the radical right's construction of authenticity. It did, however, overwrite them through elements of the performance. Mága is a violinist of international acclaim from a Gypsy family of musicians who has played a role in cultural diplomacy, representing Hungarian music abroad. The concert, meanwhile, is a yearly mega-event with a live audience of 13,000. It is broadcast by public service television and exhibits a wide variety of genres and repertoires. The performative suspension of "Nélküled"'s radical right-wing meaning was enabled partly by performing musicians of Roma origin, including, besides Mága, pop and R&B singer Caramel, who became widely popular after winning the Hungarian television talent show Megasztár. Mága's violin solo in the song not only highlighted his star status, but also contributed to the song's reinterpretation, as did the duet between Caramel and Ismerős Arcok's frontman, Attila Nyerges, who sang the emblematic line "We are of one blood" together.

Besides the symphonic orchestra, the performance was also accompanied by a choir of 150 children from within Hungary and beyond. Their participation can be understood in line with Fidesz's political discourse, which places great emphasis on the inclusion of ethnic Hungarians living abroad within a sense of national unity. Indeed, national unification was itself the first main governmental project, and included the securing of a simplified Hungarian citizenship for ethnic Hungarians from 2010 onwards. Thanks to this measure, later extended to include the right to vote, Hungary gained 1.1 million new citizens. After 2010, the government also launched educational programmes involving common leisure activities for students in Hungary and those involved in Hungarian language education in neighbouring countries (Pap 2013). The populist – as opposed to radical right-wing – version of this national unity, as exemplified by the performance of "Nélküled" at the Mága gala, involves the taming of nationalism and racism: it obscures Fidesz's anti-Roma politics through the inclusion of popular Roma artists. On a cultural level, the performance lifted the song from its original lowbrow context – biker subculture, village fairs, and chanting at football games – and moved it to a middlebrow aesthetic environment that involved orchestral arrangements and a concert hall. These newer versions of "Nélküled" thus contribute to a 'middle-classification' of radical right-wing symbolic imagery.

Our third example is the song "Tizenötmillióból egy" ("One of fifteen million") (2017) by the rock band Kowalsky meg a Vega, which received funding to popularise a government project. Although the song gained popularity organically amongst the band's following through live performances and its appearance on an album, its parallel career as part of a political project earned the band visibility and thus potential additional income. Formed in 1999 – like Ismerős Arcok – Kowalsky meg a Vega started out in the alternative rock scene, performing on the festival circuit, and gradually grew into a mainstream act capable of filling the Budapest Arena, Hungary's largest music venue (with a capacity of 12,500). "Tizenötmillióból egy" was released along with a music video produced in collaboration with the

Hungarian Defence Forces (Kowalsky Meg a Vega 2017) as part of a promotional campaign for recruiting voluntary reserves. Performances of the song are always accompanied by a projection of the video in the background, and are a highlight of the band's sets. The narrative in the video revolves around the self-sacrifice of a family man in the military, and foregrounds individual heroic behaviour, a sense of crisis through military conflict, and the nuclear family as key values and themes. The video also includes a short behind-the-scenes montage depicting members of the band undergoing military training to demonstrate their commitment to the Hungarian army and the nation. We consider this case to sit somewhere in the middle of the two types of relationship described by Garratt between music and hegemonic power: firstly, "formal promotion," that is, "state-sponsored 'official' music or composition commissioned by state agencies for promotional purposes" (Garratt 2019, 111), because the video was sponsored by the Defence Forces and includes a direct recruitment message. Secondly, "affirmation music," on the basis that various aspects of the song are more softly aligned with hegemonic populism.

The central symbol of the "fifteen million," referenced in the title and chorus (as "You are a star from fifteen million"), alludes to a sense of national unity that includes Hungarians living abroad. The symbolic use of the number refers back to the regime change of 1989–1990, when József Antall, Hungary's first post-socialist prime minister, declared himself leader of "fifteen million Hungarians," ten million of whom lived within Hungary (Szemere 2020: 12). Given its direct nationalistic reference, this line stands out from the rest of the lyrics, which emphasise individual integrity and togetherness in a state of crisis associated with modern life and represented by technology, shifting gender roles, and alienation. The song's territorial revisionism can be linked to the military theme of the video and the political context of its production. The video indirectly thematises the concept of the nation as propagated by the government, through the tropes of a homeland that needs to be defended and the soldiers defending it. Moreover, particular musical elements contribute to the affective link between patriotism and the idea of self-sacrifice for the homeland, such as the melodic, stadium-rock-esque chorus which repeatedly breaks the monotony of the lengthy verses; the sound of a bell ringing quietly under the line "Because everyone is the same under God"[8]; the emphasis on self-sacrifice in the lyrics: "Tell me, what does it mean to you that there is no greater love/Than you giving your life willingly for others" ("Kowalsky meg a Vega - Tizenötmillióból egy" n.d.); and the story of loss and sacrifice depicted in the video.

The voice and singing style (alternately "spoken word," "rapping," "MC," "guru," "yoga mentor," and "coach" (terms used in the MGA)), the eclecticism of the sound (stadium-rock during the chorus, military drums, cheap synthesiser strings), the fusion of musical traditions (rock, patriotic song, rap), the multiple themes in the lyrics, and the video and its political context (the Defence Forces) all point the song in several directions, resisting any one narrative. This diversity creates affordances when it comes to attracting different audiences. Beyond subcultural symbols or aesthetic elements such as the band's biker rock appearance

(strong, masculine, tattooed male bodies), the rock sound, and the speak-singing style, the lyrics make general statements about the world that easily fit into hegemonic populist discourses. For instance, the line "Where people only talk to one another on the internet" is an obvious critique of technological alienation; "Where beauty no longer begins with angels/It is enough if a good-looking celebrity takes her clothes off for the papers" critiques consumer society and commodification, with an implicit reference to an ideal past; "What respect means has become the subject of debate" emphasises a supposed lack of traditional values and implicitly critiques social progress; and so does "Where the difference between man and woman/Is slowly fading, like the night behind the rising sun" with reference to gender roles ("Kowalsky meg a Vega - Tizenötmillióból egy" n.d.). The song's stylistic looseness makes it an effective tool for broadening the reach of these meanings, thus affording various forms of connection. The widespread distribution of the song and record through tours, stadium concerts, online and offline media, as well as the CD stands in petrol stations assist this process.

The song and visuals create three kinds of affordance: first, schematically presented social problems all linked to contemporary society and associated with globalisation, a crisis in values, and moral decline; second, a feeling of national unity; and third, a(n emotional) commitment and moral duty towards the homeland and the family. These separate ideas and the song's musical eclecticism are integrated and contextualised by government discourse, whilst listeners construct meaning for themselves according to their own sensitivities, attitudes, and emotional states, all of which depend on their social position. Aside from the regular associations with Hungarians across borders, one participant criticised the representation of the army given his experience as a professional soldier. He complained about the poor infrastructure, the supposed feminisation of the profession (with an increasing number of women entering the armed forces), and associated economic precarity. A single mother, meanwhile, problematised the nuclear family as represented in the video, seeing it – and Fidesz's family policy more broadly – as exclusionary. Many participants, moreover, emphasised the lack of connection between the image of the "fifteen million," which they understood as a direct political message, and the song's general themes and style. This demonstrates that listeners often deliberately create a distance from politics when enjoying music.

The distinct political messages and even contradictory ideological elements of these three songs are all tied together by Fidesz's political discourses, and embedded within representations of the nation and threats to the national community.

Victims of the regime: Populism and elitism in anti-government protest songs

One may observe the intertwining of populist discourse and popular music not only in songs performed by artists aligned with the regime, but also in oppositional songs of protest. The second group constitutes such songs, written and performed by

artists who actively position themselves against the government, for instance by performing at oppositional demonstrations and expressing their opinions in interviews. These artists are economically dependent on the support of an older, predominantly middle-class audience that they established during the socialist era and the period of liberal hegemony before 2010. We intend to show that these songs, although written and performed in protest against the politics of the Orbán regime, often apply the discursive and representational framework of (pro-)government populism: an opposition of 'us' versus 'them,' references to the ongoing oppression of the majority, war imagery, and narratives of social, cultural, and political crisis. These elements, however, are paradoxically combined with the performance of an intellectual position to which moral superiority is attributed, thus a marked elitist stance.

The Orbán regime's process of hegemony building has included structural changes that affect the channels of knowledge transmission and information flow, and through this, those institutions that housed parts of the intellectual elite during the pre-2010 period of liberal hegemony. This included closing the daily paper *Népszabadság* in 2016 (Urbán 2016), legally obstructing the Budapest branch of the Central European University in 2017 (Corbett and Gordon 2018), transforming the Hungarian Academy of Science's research network (Láncos, 2021), replacing the leadership of the most popular independent online news platform, Index.hu, which saw an exodus of its journalists and a drastic transformation of its profile in 2020 (Kállai 2020), and transforming Budapest's University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2020 (e.g., Szilágyi 2020). In popular music, oppositional musicians such as János Bródy or Zsuzsa Koncz were gradually deprived of airplay on public service radio (with the exception of a small number of hits from the socialist era). This resulted not only in financial losses due to reduced royalties and minimal exposure for new material, but symbolic loss as well. As Bródy himself said in an interview in 2018: "The possibility to perform on stage depends in many places on whether the party likes the artists, or government institutions allocating funds to culture. [. . .] State media does not even call me. [. . .] You can call this censorship" (Balla and Németh 2018).

In this symbolic 'culture war' space, the polarisation between the government and loyal right-wing intellectuals (Kristóf 2021, 194) on one side, and oppositional intellectuals predominantly representing the old guard of the pre-2010 liberal hegemony on the other, has increased. Controlling or obstructing cultural and educational institutions has become, for the oppositional intellectual elite, symbolic issues in the larger destruction of contemporary Hungarian culture (as articulated in, e.g., Bajomi et al. 2020). This symbolic distinction between intellectuals loyal to the regime and those who oppose it, however, is both informed by and focussed on the relative (although by no means absolute) loss of prestige suffered by the liberal elite – the "democratic anti-populist" bloc of the post-socialist era (Gagyi 2014). Such discourses, however, remain at least partially blind to the continuing oppression of the working and lower classes under successive post-socialist governments. Indeed, this discourse understands the hegemony building of Fidesz to

signal a rejection of the West and civilisation more broadly, leading to a decline in general levels of culture, education, and academic performance, and the rise of talentless, uncultured people in intellectual positions who ally themselves to the party. In other words, this view draws on the idea of a global East-West hierarchy, or "East-West slope" (Melegh 2006), that it imbues with a highly moralising import (see also Böröcz 2006; Gagyi 2014). The characteristic expression of this discourse, as we demonstrate through the songs that we will analyse in this section, is tied to legitimate cultural forms and aesthetics (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]).

The first example, "Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)," written by János Bródy and performed by Zsuzsa Koncz, was released in 2016 whilst the second example, "Akit a hazája nem szeretett," written and performed by János Bródy, was released in 2018. Bródy and Koncz are iconic figures in Hungarian popular music. Their popularity originates from the Hungarian beat music generation of the 1960s and 1970s, and they belonged to the liberal intellectual elite during the 1989–90 regime change. They are strong critics of the Orbán regime today. The way in which their role as artists and intellectuals is recognised socially also stems from the era of rock music before the regime change, which has retrospectively gained symbolic value through its connotations of resistance against the socialist system.

The 2019 video for "Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)" adopts the aesthetic of a tourism film as in the case of "Hazatalál," but zooms in on cultural and social spaces and institutions around Budapest that have either been transformed, repositioned, or brought under control by the government (including the Parliament and memorial places) (Koncz Zsuzsa 2019). These images are combined with metaphors in the lyrics that refer to the political elite, described as highly irrational ("up in the castle somebody has lost the plot"[9]), along with a critique of the regime's memory politics: "The heroic past on the painted picture is fake" ("Koncz Zsuzsa - Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)" n.d.). Koncz's voice is hard and angry, and in the video, her emphatic hand gestures when performing the song on stage carry military connotations. The specific qualities of the instrumentation create what the MGA identified as a metal sound, "hard" and "agitated" (MGA, 20 February, 2020). The song foregrounds not only anger, however, but also the fight for freedom and equality: "There will be a new spring and a beautiful summer"; "The world will be beautiful again, let's not give up/In this land, you could live, and not only die" ("Koncz Zsuzsa - Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)" n.d.). The last of these lines cites Mihály Vörösmarty's poem "Szózat" which, as we have seen, also appears in "Hazatalál."

In contrast to the performance of anger in "Ne mondd"'s vocal and general instrumentation, the second case, "Akit a hazája nem szeretett," strikes a different tone. It can be characterised as a *chanson*, which simultaneously evokes the tradition of French political music and socialist-era Russian bards (such as Vladimir Vysotsky). Written in the third person singular, the lyrics create a distance between the character represented and their context, which is reinforced by the melancholy and monotony of the vocals, and the slow rhythm.

Bródy's own view, as explained in interviews (e.g., Balla and Németh 2018), is that the song explores the bitter, typically Hungarian experience of love for the homeland in the context of radical right-wing attacks against the liberal elite, who the former accuse of being traitors to that homeland. The song grounds its social critique in the people's supposed disposition to being manipulated and cheated by those who would influence their emotions. The protagonist's viewpoint highlights the loneliness and detachment of the intellectual, and the difficulty of connecting with the people: "And s/he raised her/his voice in vain: hey, people, we are heading towards the abyss/The response was: those who do not follow us are traitors"[10]; "And it is a traitor that imagines the bright future differently/And anyone that dares to doubt becomes an enemy" ("Bródy János - Akit a hazája nem szeretett" n.d.). This perspective is simultaneously elitist and anti-populist, and fits the logic of the hegemonic populism as a result: the song performs precisely the liberal intellectual role that right-wing populist discourse presents as an enemy. It thus contributes to maintaining the same discursive space.

In these songs, the image of the citizen as an enemy of the state ("Ne mondd") or of society ("Akit a hazája . . .") references tragic Hungarian historical tropes, and creates historical depth within a narrative of victimhood. In "Ne mondd," the singer acts as spokesperson for the oppressed, and this elitist positioning is reinforced by what could be interpreted as an attempt to adapt the form to the imagined taste of the audience, in order to reach a broader mass of people. Participants in the MGA felt that this was simply an exercise in style, and that it was condescending as it implied a classed hierarchy: "This is a classic attitude on the part of the intellectual elite, I [as the author] imagine [what I want to say] and I assume that I can only say this in this particular framework" (MGA, 20 February 2020). Likewise, the cultural references that dominated the discussions of "Akit a hazája nem szeretett" in focus groups suggested legitimate culture in the Bourdieusian sense: to listeners, the song evoked national memorial days in school (formal, solemn occasions steeped in history), Eastern European art films from the socialist era, and theatre.

Fed up with politics: The people against the political elite

In this third group, we will look at examples that exhibit an anti-elite populist stance – rather than anti-government or anti-Fidesz – articulated on behalf of the people against a political elite independent of party politics. The previous two sections have focussed on cases in which political or ideological commitments were crucial to the songs' popularity. Here, we will examine "Apuveddmeg" (2014) by the rap/pop duo Wellhello, and "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek" (2018) by Krúbi. The popularisation of both songs was largely determined by their position in the music industries, and, in the case of Krúbi, subcultural capital (in the form of underground 'cred'), alongside a lack of (explicit) political commitment. In fact, both songs played an important part in the popularisation of their respective artists: "Apuveddmeg" was undoubtedly Wellhello's first major hit, and "Orbán . . ." was among

Krúbi's first popular songs. The two songs place major emphasis on a critique of the political elite and of political polarisation in society. As such, they adhere to the polarising logic of populism by positing the people against the political elite in a relation of us versus them once more.

Krúbi and Wellhello's respective audiences partly differ: Wellhello reached popularity with a broad segment of the Hungarian pop audience thanks to a record label and management (first Magneoton, Hungary's largest independent record label, founded in 1990, who have also signed Ákos, and later Supermanagement), regular festival appearances (both music festivals and free local events), and radio airplay. The duo was formed in 2014 by Tomi Fluor, already known in Hungary's rap scene, and Diaz, a well-known young pop producer and singer. A radio-friendly aesthetic is evident given the structure and sound of their songs, the combination of rap and more lyrical, melodic bridges and choruses, the use of slogans and recurring phrases (such as "elnök" – "president") which have aided the process of brand creation, and the use of a backing band as well as female dancers during live performances. The songs, moreover, afford easy remix possibilities and inclusion in DJ playlists, as well as nostalgic associations with the 1990s, an era of intense nostalgia not only for the middle-aged but also younger generations. These associations are undergirded by references to 1990s pop culture through samples of well-known voice actors (a technique used in "Apuveddmeg") or computer signals from the early era of computers. The lyrical themes are typical for summer pop hits: love, relationships, and partying. Our focus groups and fieldwork at (sold out) concerts also confirmed that Wellhello's audience includes young and middle-aged listeners from the working and middle classes.

Krúbi (Krisztián Horváth), however, emerged as a subcultural phenomenon, relying heavily on self-promotion via digital media and, at least initially, a subcultural network. He appeals to an educated teenage and young adult audience – typically secondary school and university students. His career as a rapper began in 2017 as the winner of an alternative talent contest called Kikeltető ("Incubator"), which gave him the opportunity to perform on the club venue circuit as well as at music festivals, and provided exposure in independent online media. The rapid growth of his popularity was mostly a result of his unusually vulgar (even for rap) yet clever and ironic lyrics, interspersed with political references, and supported by trendy and experimental lo-fi, trap-influenced beats. This then led to music industry awards and a contract with the Hungarian subsidiary of the major label Universal, all signifying legitimation. "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek" was released on his first album *Nehézlábérzés* (2018), but the song had been part of Krúbi's live repertoire from the beginning, and contributed to his popularity.

In both "Apuveddmeg" and "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek," irony is a central aesthetic. As a tool for emotional distancing, irony can be seen to signify an intellectual discourse that reinforces the 'higher' sociocultural position of both songs. This irony is employed primarily to address the polarisation between the people and the elite, embodying not an explicit critique of the new hegemony, but of the

political elite in general. "Apuveddmeg" paints an ironic picture of the wealthy elite – the "oligarchs" – of the System of National Cooperation, engaged in conspicuous consumption. This imagery is created by evoking narratives of the 1990s as an era of post-socialist privatisation and integration into global capitalism. This period is represented through symbols of global consumption as well as the figure of the *nouveau riche* entrepreneur ("vállalkozó," "menedzser"), who carried status symbols such as a mobile phone, watches, expensive clothes, and other would-be Western products, but was derided for a lack of cultural capital or, as Bourdieu puts it, for "overdoing it" (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], 249). The song uses slang – exaggerated markers of trendiness – and overt references to wealth (such as heavy neck chains and Swarovski or Gucci products).

Participants of the MGA compared "Apuveddmeg" to 1990s-style rap music, with reference to both the sound and rhythm of the rapping. Such a style serves as the perfect vehicle for the song's critique of oligarch wealth, given that the flaunting of money is a typical theme in rap music (Davis 2011). The title – repeated in the chorus – refers to a father figure who gains (political) power through wealth, which he then gives generously away to those that he deems deserving. In the prevailing political context, this is an obvious reference to the elite of the System of National Cooperation, the top of the national bourgeoisie strengthened by the Orbán regime. In 2012, the Fidesz MP Marcell Zsiga infamously claimed that it was possible to live on 47,000 HUF (130 EUR) a month, the wage of a public worker in the then newly-introduced public workfare scheme. As a direct political reference, this figure is quoted in the song as the price of two cocktails.

The song was a mainstream pop hit upon its release, yet it was only four years later, in 2018, that it became more directly politicised. In April 2018, Tomi Fluor 'trolled' a programme on the public service channel Petőfi TV. The show was being recorded at a venue where Fluor was also present, and he briefly stepped in front of the camera to shout "Soros György" ("George Soros"). This took place at a time of intense billboard campaigning by the government in the run-up to that year's elections (Witte 2018), so although Fluor articulated no actual opinion, his gesture was taken as a criticism of government propaganda. Wellhello was subsequently removed from the playlist of the public service radio station (Petőfi Rádió) for ten days. This, understood by many in the anti-government camp as direct censorship, led to "Apuveddmeg" being played at anti-government demonstrations. In 2021, Wellhello released a 'sequel' to "Apuveddmeg" titled "Nemszámítapénz" ("Money doesn't count") (2021); the song's video draws on similar, if bolder, aesthetic and visual representations, but this time directly and comically references scandalous episodes involving oligarchs close to the Orbán regime. By framing "Nemszámítapénz" and its video as the sequel to "Apuveddmeg," Wellhello retrospectively embraced more directly anti-government interpretations, as opposed to simply drawing a general caricature of the conspicuous and vulgar elite. Along with the exertion of increased government control over popular music which, as we have argued, accelerated during the fourth Orbán government and the Covid-19 pandemic in

particular, the band itself also became more political. Fluor's public statements during these years confirm this, as his criticism of the government is overt (e.g., After Sajó Dáviddal 2021).

In contrast to "Apuveddmeg," the lyrics of Krúbi's "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek" are built directly on a sarcastic political allegory to critique not only the Orbán regime, but also the oppositional elite. The latter is encapsulated in the figure of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány – at that time of the Hungarian Socialist Party, and since then the Democratic Coalition (DK) – who resigned in 2009 after a series of scandals but has not left the political arena. The two leaders – Orbán and Gyurcsány – are imagined performing a sexual act together in a public toilet, surrounded by Fidesz and DK voters, the latter depicted stereotypically as Gyurcsány-loving pensioners. Meanwhile, the rest – the general public, who as the song emphasises in fact constitute the majority of the Hungarian population – look on, puzzled but unable to leave the foul premises. Indeed, the public's frustration can be understood to go beyond the governing party and the incompetent, ineffective opposition, and to include the entire political elite of the three decades since regime change. The singer's voice was correspondingly described by participants of the MGA session as like "phlegm," "detached," and "apathetic," whilst the lo-fi instrumentation was "calm," "monotonous," "bare," but "pleasant." The style of rapping also exhibits a deliberate imperfection – the flow stutters and certain rhymes are deliberately clunky, performing a kind of soliloquy. The frustration expressed is without passion, and mostly manifest in the obscenity of the lyrics.

On the one hand, "Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek" ostensibly breaks not only with the tradition, pre-regime change, of coded speech that characterises the other protest songs discussed here, but also with the dominant apoliticism of Hungarian pop music by directly naming names and issues from the contemporary political landscape. Krúbi also manages to construct a polarising populist discourse that is different to those previously discussed. His is one in which the penetration of politics into ordinary, everyday life – as voiced by the stifled anger of a solitary, monologising citizen – is posited against the cultural hegemony of the political elite by means of style: Krúbi's obscene, sarcastic vulgarity stands against the refined, poetic, coded means of expression typical of the intellectual elite. Irony, however, is nevertheless an intellectual mode, and Krúbi's audience, though much younger than that of Bródy or Koncz, remains strictly separate from the working and lower classes. Indeed, there is a sharp contrast between Krúbi's intellectual, White upper-middle-class background (his parents are both engineers), and the lower-class status of many commercial hip-hop or trap artists who are often of Roma ethnicity. While there is no quantitative data to substantiate this claim definitively, our fieldwork indicates that there is little overlap between Krúbi's middle-class audience and the partly Roma working- or lower-class audience of commercial hip-hop and trap. Finally, due to its anti-elite populist stance, the song is unsuited to political mobilisations. Indeed, as Krúbi confirms in interviews, he rejects the public persona of a political artist (e.g., Partizán 2021). Rather, Krúbi's performances of

songs such as “Orbán, verd ki a Ferinek” remain a valve through which steam can be let off from time to time.

In their use of irony as a central aesthetic principle, these two songs mock the Hungarian political elite of the post-2010 period. Krúbi’s song places prominent politicians – representing both the government and the opposition – at the centre, whilst Wellhello extends its criticism to a broader elite that benefits from the System of National Cooperation. This elite is depicted as nouveau riche, with bad taste and significant economic capital to be flaunted, but no cultural capital. Both songs claim to represent the perspective of normal people by adopting a middle-class position, or even an intellectual one in the case of Krúbi (given the utilisation of subcultural capital). Krúbi’s criticism of the people standing inert and away from political action is more direct, even if the artist himself refrains from adopting a political public persona.

Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the ways in which the restructuring of power by various Orbán governments since 2010 is presented in contemporary, mainstream popular music in Hungary. We have explored how mainstream pop-rock may serve to spread hegemonic right-wing populist discourses, and thus shore up the cultural and ideological pillar that supports the hegemony building of the new semi-peripheral accumulation regime (Gagyi and Gerőcs 2022). We have also looked at songs whose aim is to challenge this hegemony. Our analysis suggests, however, that the space for counter-hegemonic meaning, at least within the mainstream of the popular music field, is limited.

As part of Fidesz’s hegemony building, the post-2010 governments have restructured the popular music sphere’s relations of autonomy and dependence through cultural and media policy. This has included the establishment of state infrastructure to support artists – especially those at the beginning of their career – the incorporation of certain institutions, and selective support for certain well-established artists with longer careers, who in turn show loyalty to the regime. As a result of this transformation process, therefore, a new pattern of dependence on the market and the state has replaced artists’ primary and direct exposure to the market. Our analysis has combined a focus on the aesthetics of the songs studied and their consumption in various settings, against the backdrop of these processes in the popular music field. Artists in the three different groups that we have identified, namely pro-government, anti-government, and anti-elite, employ different strategies which are shaped by their respective positions in the field. In terms of income structure, the first group of artists – Ákos, Ismerős Arcok, and Kowalsky meg a Vega – have moved towards direct government funding and sponsorship by companies close to the government. The latter also involves accepting commissions where songs or compositions are to be used in the service of political projects (such as memory politics, or in the case of “Tizenötmillióból egy,” military recruitment). From the

perspective of the cultural product itself, this also involves an alignment – not only in the case of directly government-funded music – of the songs and their videos with right-wing populist messages: the strengthening of national unity, a crisis discourse, and polarisation. In this way, these songs help to create a cultural, affective, and collective social environment for the acceptance of political projects; consent is manufactured through both the aesthetics and consumption of popular music.

Those artists who have assumed an oppositional position to the new regime (such as János Bródy and Zsuzsa Koncz) have experienced a loss of economic capital, in particular royalties, as a direct result of state punishment for their political stance, however this is somewhat compensated for by gains made in symbolic capital. The source of the latter is partly their long-time legacy as legends of the beat movement, writers and performers of old-time hits still played by radio stations (such as Retro Radio), and their appearance on nostalgia playlists. Moreover, they continue to sell physical records and have a stable live following (mostly middle-aged and older). Their symbolic capital also stems from their post-socialist position as public intellectuals representing the "democratic anti-populist" liberal elite (Gagyi, 2014). They capitalise on this status in particular when they release anti-government protest songs. Lastly, a group of younger artists such as Wellhello and Krúbi have managed to make good use of the opportunities presented by a digitised music industry and a professional network without (substantially) relying on state funding (though Wellhello certainly makes use of live performance opportunities and infrastructure provided by the state). As a result, they enjoy relative autonomy with regard to expressing political opinions: they are able to voice direct criticism of the government, as well as the political elite in general, within a popular music mainstream that still primarily aims to be apolitical.

We have argued that the goal of the Fidesz government's populist discourses is the symbolic creation and representation of a middle class, which it encourages by performing its cultural characteristics and projecting a common and middlebrow taste world as the norm. This imagining and representation of the middle class serves to ideologically underpin the regime's class politics: economic and social support for not only the Hungarian bourgeoisie (Éber et al. 2019; Scheiring 2021) but also a broader group of "economically and biologically 'productive' families" (Scheiring and Szombati 2020), and beneficiaries of social policy and the workfare regime. Meanwhile, citizens deemed unproductive are deprived of such support. As Brubaker (2020) argues, the (re)distribution of resources is accompanied by the (re)distribution of respect and recognition through populist and nationalist discourses that reinforce a moralising distinction between deserving and undeserving populations. Our examples have shown that popular music aesthetics – especially the use of genre and stylistic conventions to mobilise audiences as social groups, imagined or real, as well as articulate their social and political positions – serve as the cultural bedrock for this ideological landscape. In the pro-government songs that we have discussed, the hegemon's imagined

middle class is constructed through musical affordances: a familiar, even nostalgic mainstream pop-rock style (as heard in “Hazatalál” and “Tizenötmillióból egy”), or the aesthetic elevation from a radical subculture to a middlebrow style (as in “Nélküled”), speak to a broadly defined middle-class audience. All three songs, however, actively reinforce specific elements of the government’s right-wing populism, including the symbolic and moral importance of patriotism and the homeland in opposition to a threatening ‘elsewhere’ (the West); the importance of the nuclear family and so-called traditional gender roles; and the representation of national unity through diversity. The protest songs analysed here take a more elitist approach and speak to a narrower, mostly intellectual audience, though they also apply similar populist tropes. Moreover, the positioning of these artists as democratic anti-populists draws on, and symbolically strengthens, the post-socialist polarisation between the liberal and right-wing power blocs. Finally, the anti-elite pop and hip-hop songs in our selection utilise a populist framework to speak in the name of the people against a corrupt political elite: first and foremost, members of the governing party and the top of the national bourgeoisie (the oligarchs), as well as the leaders of the opposition. The target audience corresponds to the demands of the market: young people, primarily urban and intellectual, who are active consumers of both recorded and live music in the case of Krúbi, compete with a broader (in terms of age) middle-class audience in the case of Wellhello. Our analysis of these three groups indicates that in Hungary, populism has become the dominant framework through which to express a political opinion and explore the theme of social crisis in popular culture, irrespective of which political camp the artist identifies with.

Notes

1 We use the term ‘music industries’ in plural form as suggested by Williamson and Cloonan (2007).
2 Our own translation from the Hungarian original. Direct quotations from Hungarian original texts, including not only song lyrics but also group discussions, are our own translation (E. Barna and Á. Patakfalvi-Czirják).
3 We also included songs and music videos by ‘various artists’ that feature well-known stars, representing a variety of genres as well as geographical locations. These are government-commissioned projects written and performed for memorial days important for Fidesz’s memory politics, which can also be understood as populist projects. We explore these elsewhere (Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják 2022a).
4 A circle signals the presence of the given criteria in the song.
5 Lyrics are available online (“Ákos - Hazatalál” n.d.).
6 “Nélküled”’s trajectory and shifting status along with political changes is explored in detail in Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják (2022b).
7 Lyrics available online (“Ismerős Arcok - Nélküled” n.d.).
8 Lyrics available online (“Kowalsky meg a Vega - Tizenötmillióból egy” n.d.).
9 Lyrics available online (“Koncz Zsuzsa - Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)” n.d.).
10 Lyrics available online (“Bródy János - Akit a hazája nem szeretett” n.d.).

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2

PLAYING "ITALIANNESS" IN POPULAR MUSIC

National populism and music in contemporary Italy

Manuela Caiani and Enrico Padoan

Introduction

This chapter discusses popular music and cultural practices as vectors for the articulation of national populism in the contemporary Italian context. Drawing on the introduction to this volume, our empirical research aims to explore the ways in which popular music functions as a medium for the mainstreaming of populism in Italy. We begin with an analysis of the Multiple Opportunity Structures (MOS) of the country. These are the various frameworks – institutional, political, cultural, and commercial – that have a bearing on the link between populism and popular music in Italy, whether directly or indirectly. We then move to an illustration of our empirical findings. This begins with an examination of the ways in which populist messages are socially diffused, legitimised, and made popular within the country through popular music. We then focus on how popular music that contains populist elements is received by individual voters, who constitute the potential electoral base for populist parties. Following this, we move to look at the exploitation of popular music and references by populist politicians keen to define their own political-cultural identity whilst appealing to specific demographics. The conclusion summarises our findings and contextualises them by highlighting certain particularities of the Italian case. To address the above questions, we use three different empirical approaches: musicological group analysis, sociological reception analysis via interviews, and data mining for selected keywords on the web.

Sociocultural approaches to the study of populism identify the differentiation between so-called high and low culture as one of its predominant features (Ostiguy 2018). Culture here comprises both a politico-cultural (implying, for the low end of the spectrum, emotional investment in a leader and a refusal of

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technocracy) and a sociocultural dimension, which is key for the purposes of this chapter. Populism, according to Pierre Ostiguy (2020, 39), is an "affectual narrative [. . .], the antagonistic appropriation for political, mobilizational purposes of an 'unpresentable Other,' itself historically created in the process of a specific 'proper' civilizational project." This framing of populist antagonism appears similar to Cas Mudde's ideational conceptualisation of populism (Mudde 2007), but differs from it in one key respect: instead of positing the people as 'pure,' as Mudde does, Ostiguy identifies in populist appeals the celebration (and politicisation) of popular impurity, so to speak – because it is this impurity that makes the people genuine, authentic. Sociocultural appeals (i.e., the sociocultural dimension as theorised by Ostiguy) are key to the processes of populist identification and mobilisation:

> the use of informal, locally-anchored, language, the exaggeration of "typical" displays, the body language, are all key, recognizable, telling elements of populism socioculturally. And this use, often quite transgressive, is always directed antagonistically at an Other, manifestly not of the "national pleb."
>
> *(Ostiguy 2020, 31)*

Analyses of populist phenomena and processes often overlook culture and cultural practices. The mechanisms that lead to a discursive homogenisation of the people, and to antagonistic attitudes towards elites are, more often than not, scrutinised at the level of the individual (in variables such as distrust of political institutions and representative democracy, and other so-called populist attitudes such as hostility towards migrants, cf. Rooduijn et al. 2017). Pippa Inglehart and Ronald Norris' famous "cultural backlash" thesis (Inglehart and Norris 2016) sees the revival of nativist and conservative attitudes as a key factor in the rise of global populism, whilst others have highlighted the political saliency of the GAL-TAN divide in such developments (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist, a dimension which is increasingly different from the old left-right conflict on redistribution. See Emanuele et al. 2020). However, equating culture with attitudes misses the anthropological point of the concept of culture as a "whole and distinctive way of life" (Williams in Barker 2001). As such, this chapter reflects on music and populism in Italy by examining taste and other sociocultural markers so as to interrogate the role played by cultural production and consumption in the emergence and reproduction of populist phenomena.

Italy currently plays host to right-wing, left-wing (hybrid) populisms (Zulianello 2021). Our study focuses on the main political actors in Italy at the time of conducting this research, namely the right-wing League and the ideologically hybrid – but often grouped in the inclusionary populist family – Five Star Movement (M5S).

Multiple opportunity structures for the relationship between popular music and populism in Italy

Popular music in Italy

Italy offers an extremely interesting case for studying the ways in which popular music can contribute to the spread of populist ideologies, and how it can be incorporated into populist strategies. Populism is as varied as it is central to recent and contemporary Italian politics. Furthermore, as we will detail below, the general landscape of Italian popular music lends itself to several reflections for our purposes. This is due not only to its centrality within patterns of consumption, but also to the many different and longstanding links between the Italian music scene and the country's politics.

According to the IFPI's (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) 2019 Global Music Report, a study of the nineteen largest national music markets worldwide, 59% of the Italian population claim to be "music fans," two points above the global average. Indeed, Italians spend more than sixteen hours per week listening to music on average. In terms of genre, their preference is for international pop (63%, in line with the global average), then Italian pop (61%), rock (54%, in line with the global average), and *cantautori* (singer-songwriters, listened to by 49% of Italians, over double the global average and particularly well represented in the 35-and-above demographic). Although on-demand listening is widespread, radio remains the most popular means of listening to music (94% of the sample, the second-highest national average amongst the countries covered in the report). The emergence of highly popular radio stations such as *Radio Italia – Only Italian Music* – has significantly increased the amount of Italian music played on the radio, after a period during which English-language pop music was favoured (Tomatis 2019). This is all consistent with the significant and relatively intergenerational popularity enjoyed by Italian pop music amongst Italian listeners, and makes Italian-language pop particularly important to an understanding of how political messages are reproduced through this specific form of popular culture.

It is impossible to analyse the Italian popular music scene without mentioning the Sanremo Festival. The first edition of the *Festival della Canzone Italiana di Sanremo* (popularly referred to as simply Sanremo) was held in 1951, with the first televised edition following in 1955. It is generally agreed (Agostini 2013) that Sanremo has actively contributed, and in fact has been critical, to the very definition of *canzone italiana* (literally: Italian song), thus creating a sort of canon of Italian popular music – an exemplary case of an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), albeit one that has been subject to continuous transformation over the decades. Indeed, as the official name of the festival shows, and in the words of the *Radiocorriere* (the official magazine of the RAI, the Italian public broadcasting company), Sanremo was created with the sole purpose of defending the "original elements of Italian songs" from an influx of "Afro-American and Iberoamerican sounds" (Campus 2015, 21).

The songs of Sanremo have actively shaped and become part of what is known as a national-popular repertoire. This repertoire has long been equated with low culture, particularly in leftist critiques, in ways that echo Adorno's famous reflections on the inherently homogenising and authoritarian effects of popular culture (Dei 2016). Umberto Eco described Sanremo songs as "gastronomic song [. . .] supposed to be background music" (Eco 1964, 284), but "[also] one of the most efficient means for the ideological coercion of citizens" (Eco 1964, 278). Meanwhile, Stephen Gundle, in his influential book on the Communist Party and mass culture, defined Sanremo as "a central element of that conservative mass culture that was the real carrier of the Italian cultural unification" (1995, 10). Gundle contends that although the Communists paradoxically won the battle for hegemony in high culture (that is, within universities and other intellectual milieus), they lost the same in low culture (in the mass culture industries, crucially TV and cinema); the Berlusconi era demonstrated this particularly clearly (Dei 2011).

Following a period of declining popularity during the hyper-politicised 1970s (Borgna 1986), when Italy's music scene was shaped by more progressive cantautori, the early 1980s restored Sanremo as *the* Italian music event (Tomatis 2019). Politics was far from absent, however, and in fact the entire history of the festival has been marked by political controversy (Campus 2015). Several parliamentary debates have been held concerning Sanremo, produced as it is by the public broadcasting company RAI, which maintains relatively close links to governmental and political interests (Hallin and Mancini 2012; Campus 2015). As early as the festival's second edition, the two winning songs, both performed by Nilla Pizzi, touched on politically sensitive issues: nationalism/irredentism in "Vola colomba" ("Fly, dove"), in reference to the question of Trieste[1], and a (not so subtle) satirical critique of the ruling Christian Democracy party in "Papaveri e papere" ("Poppies and ducks"). The singer Adriano Celentano provoked the ire of conservatives in 1961 with a 'scandalous' (sexually explicit by the standards of the time) performance of "24.000 baci" ("24,000 kisses"). However, he then triggered strong critiques from progressives in 1969 when he sang "Chi non lavora non fa l'amore" ("Those who don't work don't make love") during the peak of the workers' strikes. Direct interventions have also been a recurrent feature from politicians seeking to contest, amongst other things, the politically charged speeches of guest stars (as, for instance, in the case of left-leaning artists such as Roberto Benigni or Jovanotti), the selection of singers, or the legitimacy of the voting system (Magaudda 2020).

Populism in Italy

Populist movements in Italy exist at various points on the exclusionary-inclusionary scale (Mudde and Rovira 2013). Certainly, the 2018 national elections proved that populism in the country could no longer be considered a fringe phenomenon. Up until the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009, the country was in

some ways a precursor to the boom in populism across Europe, especially its neoliberal and nativist-regionalist variants (Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Northern League, rebranded as Lega in 2017, respectively; see Passarelli and Tuorto 2019). Indeed, populism has been an enduring phenomenon since the collapse of the so-called First Republic in 1992 (Anselmi and Blokker 2020). However, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, and like other Southern European countries (Font et al. 2021), Italy has also witnessed the rise of an inclusionary form of populism, albeit an ideologically polyvalent one (Pirro 2018): the Five Star Movement (M5S). The M5S has been categorised as a "movement party" (Della Porta et al. 2017) due to its weak organisational structure, in which both centralising-charismatic and decentralising-participative characteristics have long coexisted (Caiani et al. 2021). The party was founded in 2009, and was led for nearly a decade by the comedian Beppe Grillo. Traditionally marked by vehement anti-establishment rhetoric and, as mentioned, a consistent refusal of any ideological label, the party under its current leader Giuseppe Conte has, since 2022, been trying to qualify its anti-establishment positions and align itself on the left of the political spectrum. The M5S made unexpectedly huge gains in the 2013 general election, winning 26% of the vote. The party framed the country's problems as derived from a fracture between 'honest people' and political and economic 'castes,' which then enabled it to attract disillusioned voters from the left and the right. The centre-left Democratic Party and the Northern League suffered particularly from this strategy, as both were marred by corruption scandals at the time. However, the Northern League was reinvigorated by the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who took advantage of the so-called migration crisis (widely identified in the literature as one of the drivers of the populist radical right vote in Europe (Caiani and Graziano 2019)) not only to strengthen the party's traditional anti-immigrant and xenophobic message, but also to reshape its strong regionalist identity (Passarelli and Tuorto 2019).

Indeed, Salvini's idea to cut "Northern" from the party's name so as to appeal to the entire country was remarkably successful. In the 2018 general election, the League won an unprecedented 17% of the national vote, and obtained electorally significant percentages in all Italian regions whilst comfortably maintaining its stronghold in Northern Italy. For its part, the M5S secured an astonishing 32% of the vote under the leadership of Luigi Di Maio, thus becoming the largest party in terms of electoral support and a real political hegemon in Southern Italy. The two populist parties, after complex negotiations, managed to form a coalition government (calling itself the Government of Change) led by the then practically unknown academic and jurist Giuseppe Conte. The Government of Change's policies were defined by a pronounced contrast with the EU, particularly on budgetary and migratory issues (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019). Indeed, Euroscepticism has been identified as the real glue of the coalition (Caiani and Padoan 2021). Its political agenda was broadly marked by a sort of division

of competencies (Vittori 2020) between the M5S, which focused on typically left-wing issues such as labour market reforms to protect workers in precarious sectors, the introduction of new social assistance schemes, and anti-corruption reforms, whilst the League concentrated on lowering taxes for the self-employed, pension reforms, aggressive law and order policies, and opposing immigration.[2]

It was precisely this latter issue that, having achieved an unquestionable centrality in the public discourse, allowed Salvini to lead the League to 33% of the vote in the 2019 European elections. The M5S, meanwhile, suffered real losses – in particular to the League – and fell to 17%. This shift in power convinced Salvini to break from his coalition ally in August 2019 and target early elections, though the M5S managed to form a new government – led again by Giuseppe Conte – with the Democratic Party, along with other minor centrist and leftist parliamentary groups. Most of the history of the so-called Conte II government was dominated by the Covid-19 crisis. This served to strengthen Conte's position as prime minister, and he enjoyed consistently high levels of support at this time. The Conte II government was also decisive for the strategy (and identity) of the M5S: having once fiercely refused any electoral alliance or identification with both the left and the right, the M5S slowly but surely came to occupy the left of Italian politics, whilst also undergoing dramatic changes to its organisation and leadership, now fully under Conte (Padoan 2022).

We have decided, in this chapter, not to discuss the right-wing nationalist Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party, which takes its name from the opening lyrics of the national anthem. Fratelli d'Italia is currently the largest party in Italy (as of 2022's parliamentary elections), and the party of the current prime minister Giorgia Meloni. Indeed, when we conducted our research, the party had not been electorally successful like the Five Star Movement and the League had been. Furthermore, FdI is the direct heir of a post-fascist party. Whilst some scholars consider it to belong to the populist radical right (Bobba and Roncarolo 2018), others rightly emphasise how the FdI's anti-establishment rhetoric is much less prominent than its more traditionally authoritarian, conservative, and nationalist focus (Albanese et al. 2019).

To summarise the above, populism has been a central phenomenon in Italian politics for the last thirty years. What is more, major populist actors such as Berlusconi and Grillo are tightly bound up with the popular cultural sphere. Indeed, both of them are products – and, in the case of Berlusconi, one of the foremost entrepreneurs – of the Italian media and cultural industry. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that both have made full use of popular music imagery (Berlusconi publicly singing *chansons françaises*, as he had during his youth, to relaunch his self-made-man myth (see cesargdp 2007) and events (Grillo's several appearances at the Sanremo festival (see communitàqueeniana 2020; and Sword730Pe 2012)) to define their public personas. Overall, one can conclude that the Italian context is highly conducive to interactions between populism and popular music.

Empirical analysis

As mentioned above, the first step in our analysis is to look at cultural productions. To what extent are populist messages, tropes, and imagery present within contemporary Italian popular music? To what extent do songs that, *prima facie,* promote populist messages, lend themselves to be effective vehicles of populist worldviews? To explore these questions, we conducted musicological group analysis sessions (see this volume's introduction for details on the method) on a selection of popular Italian songs that have emerged as particularly relevant with respect to populism. Musicological group analysis (MGA: Doehring 2019) works in sessions (of roughly two hours each), and involves three to five participants listening to a given song multiple times.[3] Participants first listen to the song under discussion without being given its title, the artist, or the year, so as not to prejudice the discussion. They are then asked to describe what they have heard and to give their opinion in as much detail as possible, then to offer an interpretation that others can take up and comment on. The goal of each MGA session is to collect a spectrum of each song's possible affordances (DeNora 2000; see below). Participants are also asked to note down any association that comes to mind (from adjectives to landscapes, cultural connections such as other songs, movies, and books, or emotions), as well as to identify potential audiences and cultural, social, or even strategic political appropriations that the song may be likely to trigger.

In our MGA sessions, we did not explicitly seek or limit our search to straightforwardly populist claims, as if we were focusing only on party manifestos or political communications. Rather, our objective was to understand the extent to which this contemporary Italian popular music repertoire might provide populist affordances for both listeners and political leaders. We understand affordance to refer to the complex relationship between humans and human-produced things (tools, technologies, social media, music), between practices of reappropriation and cognitive processes of reification (DeNora 2000). Applying the concept of affordance to music studies implies assessing that "music [. . .] can be invoked as an ally for a variety of world-making activities, it is a workspace for semiotic activity, a resource for doing, being, and naming the aspects of social reality, including the realities of subjectivity and self" (DeNora 2000, 40). However, "materials are by no means empty semiotic spaces" (40): some songs afford more than others in terms of being recognisable as populist carriers, or for populist reappropriation.

The purpose of each of the MGA sessions was then to define, through the active involvement of the participants and the collective and dialectical elaboration of concepts, categories, and intuitions, the different messages, interpretations, potential uses, and exploitations of the piece under examination, as well as its potential audiences.

As for the songs analysed, we looked at the following: Emma Marrone's "Non è l'inferno" ("This is not hell"), 2012 Sanremo winner; rappers J-Ax and Fedez's big hit "Senza pagare" ("Without paying"), 2017; Rocco Hunt's "Nu juorno buono"

("A good new day"), 2014 Sanremo winner; Venetian rock band Rumatera's "La grande V" ("The big V"), 2011 (plausibly linked to the League's discourse); and right-wing songwriter Giuseppe Povia's iconic "Chi comanda il mondo?" ("Who controls the world?"), 2016.

The songs by Emma Marrone, J-Ax and Fedez, and Rocco Hunt were selected following a content and visual analysis of 190 popular songs and their videos from 2009 to 2018. These were the twenty most downloaded songs, plus the top three songs from Sanremo, per year (for details on this analysis, see Caiani and Padoan 2023). In this preliminary phase, we selected approximately thirty songs that, according to our definition of populism, seemed to have some potential as carriers of populist messages. From these thirty songs, we chose for our musicological group analysis three songs that were extremely popular in the country, and belong to the repertoires of some of the most famous Italian musicians of the last decade. To this sample we then added the aforementioned songs by Rumatera and Povia. The band Rumatera plays parody pop-rock in a Venetian dialect; its repertoire, although not outwardly ideological, is particularly interesting for its sarcastic celebration of regional identity in a region considered the electoral stronghold of the League. As for Povia (2006's Sanremo winner), his songs have increasingly come to promote populist messages and reflect the anti-democratic, authoritarian, and xenophobic tendencies of exclusionary populism in Italy, whilst casting the European Union as a threat to the Italian people. More recently, Povia has become one of the most prominent public figures to support the anti-vaccine movement in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Povia has in recent years been creating his own niche as a relatively popular political influencer, and boasts over 300,000 followers on his Facebook page.

Povia's song "Chi comanda il mondo?" ("Who controls the world?") was largely seen by the MGA participants to contain "plenty" of anti-EU and anti-globalisation references. They described the song as "well-produced and quite trendy – featuring rap verses within a rock structure – not something you would hear in neo-fascist milieus." However, many participants also considered it "poisonous, sometimes scary," "particularly the lullaby at the beginning, perhaps referring to his previous well-known songs for children – it is a kind of esoteric imagery." They identified xenophobic and antisemitic references, evident in lyrics that denounce a "tower of Babel responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus in Israel," and that are aimed at listeners with a knowledge of and sympathy for conspiracy theories (Giuseppe Povia 2015).

The participants of our MGAs described Povia as "a fanatic, evidently [. . .] but someone who gives the impression of believing in what he sings"; "it is surely not popular, it is something for people who have some political interest, looking for political answers: I would define it as a clickbait song." They continued: "When he sings 'bitch currency,' referring to the Euro, he whispers . . . and in the video with a megaphone, he obviously positions himself as a 'politically incorrect artist.'" One felt that whilst Povia's audience "may be quite significant in number, in my opinion

they are much more of an extremist political community than a music fandom." This depiction is fairly in line with how anti-vaccine movements are often portrayed – and, indeed, as we will detail below, what a Povia concert is actually like. In this case, populism does not seem the most appropriate category for the emerging imagery.

Although Povia does sometimes adopt one of populism's main attributes (that is, its reference to the people), his tone in his public performances is much more indicative of the enlightened minority trope. We attended two of Povia's concerts in 2021: in Bologna (August) and in Vittorio Veneto, Treviso (November). Indeed, both concerts were the closing events for two anti-vaccine rallies, with varying numbers of attendees (less than one hundred in Bologna, nearly 400 in Vittorio Veneto). The rallies consisted of appearances from a dozen different orators (activists, journalists, health experts). As Povia opined during his performance in Bologna: "I am the only songwriter singing about social issues. . . in the seventies, if you were dedicated to songs about love, you would have been dubbed a fascist!" (our translation). This is a minority struggling for their conception of freedom, the keyword in both Povia's performances and discography. During the demonstrations, the people were often portrayed as naturally free actors whose right it is to rebel to improve their living situation. In contrast to the so-called enlightened minority, however, other people were described as ignorant and in need of guidance. The stand adopted by Povia and *his* people implied that they saw themselves as those in receipt of the truth, and not so much representatives of a 'true people' often associated with submissive herd behaviour.

Each of Povia's songs was typically preceded by statements such as: "I submitted this song to the Sanremo festival but they rejected it! Now you'll see why." Extreme libertarianism merged with conservatism: "they won't touch our children! We have the right to choose for them!" Indeed, it is no coincidence that – despite some very minor opportunities such as sporadic appearances in local festivals – Povia has not become the organic musical mascot of a populist party such as the League. As we will detail below, the League's strategy is to appropriate a more popular (that is, well-known) repertoire and shape it towards its political purposes. Povia's *weltanschauung* seems better captured by Amlinger and Nachtwey's (2022) concept of "libertarian authoritarianism" than by the concept of populism. Amlinger and Nachwey argue that the core values of libertarian-authoritarian movements are sovereignty, self-determination, and fundamental scepticism about authority (all of which are easily traceable in Povia's speeches and songs). According to Amlinger and Nachwey, these movements are led by "thinkers who see themselves as heroic figures in a conflict of truth, supposedly ready to accept sacrifices for the common good" – again, fully in line with Povia's persona.

In the other songs examined in our musicological group analysis sessions, participants often pulled out concepts such as: national identity (Italianness, or *Italianità* – the extent to which something is compatible or represents a stereotyped view of what is 'typically Italian'), nostalgia, hedonistic values, an individualist rather than collective approach to politics, and authenticity (in which,

for example, the singer is a self-made man with a strong personality, and does not follow others).

Emma Marrone's "Non è l'inferno" (2012) was seen by participants as typically San Remo Festival style, because of its "engaged and highly rhetorical lyrics" and because the "melody and the singing style [seemed] emotional and reminiscent of traditional melodic Italian popular music." Indeed, Marrone won Sanremo with "Non è l'inferno" in 2012, after coming second in 2011 with "Arriverà" ("It will come," a popular melodic love song). Marrone is a pop-rock singer who rose to fame through TV talent shows. The lyrics of "Non è l'inferno" take the form of a letter written by an elderly father worried about his son's future. In our MGA the song was labelled variously as 'pathetic/mushy,' 'ingenuous,' 'sincere,' and as addressing "precariousness and hope: a rock ballad from a great performer." Interestingly, Emma Marrone – who could hardly be considered a politically engaged singer given her back catalogue – recently expressed her support for feminist and pro-migrant campaigns, thus attracting criticism from the League's supporters and certain public figures. Participants of our MGA underlined some ideologically charged words as "life," "blood," "country," "God," "faith," "father," and "I believe in the country. . ." Moreover, they described "Non è l'inferno" as containing "quasi-militaristic imagery" and as being "reactionary," but also as articulating a "social critique." The song's combination of melody and lyrics was seen as targeting a (stereo)typical Sanremo audience. Above all, its Italianness (its proximity to stereotypical portrayals of Italian national identity) was perceived differently according to the centrality assigned to the song's social message: those who disliked the song described it as "reactionary-populist," because of its references to traditional values and its popular sound, whilst those who were sympathetic to the song considered it "interesting," "surprising," and an "effective social critique." Overall, "Non è l'inferno" can be said to play with nationalist and populist themes. The song's structure, Marrone's performance, and the official video (with its portraits of elderly people) all emphasise Italianness, merging family, Catholic identity, and a mistrust of politicians enjoying privileges. The suffering people that "Non è l'inferno" refers to are the pious, humble, working classes that deserve help ('deservingness' being a key frame adopted by right-wing populists in their welfare-related proposals: see Rathgeb 2021). At the same time, the father writing the letter that constitutes the song's lyrics is a war veteran disappointed by his country and its rulers. This seems close to a stylised 'American populist' frame, which draws on conservative imagery but points out how conservative values have been betrayed by cynical elites, thereby potentially "questioning if adhering to such values is really worth it," as one MGA participant put it.

Many of these reflections also apply to Rocco Hunt's "Nu juorno buono" (2014). Also a Sanremo winner (Hunt was awarded the Emerging Artists Prize in 2014), the song is a mainstream rap piece delivered in Neapolitan dialect that celebrates everyday life in working-class Neapolitan neighbourhoods. Despite

being a rap song, "Nu juorno buono" is sufficiently melodic to appeal to a broad Sanremo public, whilst fulfilling the requirements for radio play. According to our MGA, it is also "reassuring" in terms of its lyrics, eliciting "hope" through a sort of "non-divisive, 'light' social critique." The usage of Neapolitan dialect contributes to the song's being "neither leftist, nor rightist." As one participant put it, the song also "mobilises territorial identities [. . .] there is a difference to Northern dialects, which immediately make me think of the League." The singer's persona is also important for this "reassuring" – politically engaged but non-conflictual – affect: "anyone could like him, a fresh-faced [acqua e sapone], somewhat nerdy guy singing about local pride, unity and hope." Many of the participants in our MGA session on "'Nu juorno buono" also associated the song with the M5S, though less for its anti-establishment characteristics than the "kindness revolution" that the party repeatedly declared itself in favour of. At the same time, it is worth highlighting that when Hunt expressed a political opinion in one of the (few) interviews that he has given, he repeatedly described himself as "absolutely apolitical," and denounced "politicians" for "overpromising" and "failing to solve the Southern question" (Caiani and Padoan 2023). One could in fact argue that, no doubt in spite of Hunt's intentions, even this apparent neutrality is likely to be associated with the rhetoric of the M5S. The lack of any explicit endorsements means such opinions are entirely consistent with the M5S's image and proposals, as was indeed noted in our MGA session.

Another song examined through MGA was "Senza pagare" (2017) by J-Ax and Fedez. Both rappers are famous: the former has a long career that began in the nineties, whilst the latter is one of Italy's largest influencers (with over 13 million Instagram followers) and one half of a popular commercial brand (the so-called Ferragnez) with his wife Chiara Ferragni (a fashion blogger/entrepreneur with over 27 million Instagram followers). Both J-Ax and Fedez have publicly endorsed the M5S, with Fedez having even written the party's anthem for its 2014 electoral campaign. "Senza pagare," an extremely popular song (with over 90 million YouTube views), celebrates the supposedly humble origins of both singers who are now able to gain access to highly rarefied milieus thanks to their hard-won status – they "enter without paying," as we heard in the chorus. In our MGA, "Senza pagare" was interpreted as "celebrating a revolutionary act which isn't revolutionary at all." Its sound is "emotive, the minor chords that aim straight at the heart are prevalent": it is a "motivational song," with a clear appeal to group chanting: it "makes you feel powerful." It was also described as "typical of J-Ax and Fedez's repertoire," much of which are songs whose social critique fades away with the chorus: "moments of transgression" are completely overturned by catchy, entertaining, carefree, and light-hearted melodies. The participants argued that "Senza pagare" encourages identification amongst "lower-middle class people, I mean, not particularly well-off but that can afford a night of excess." Taken as a whole, the song (and accompanying video – see AxEFedezVEVO 2017) is a "justification of the social status achieved by the artists: they seem to be telling

us 'we worked a lot for this, so it is well deserved, and we can afford to be rude.'" One way of linking these appraisals to the concept of populism is, following Ostiguy, to consider populism as *mainly* a symbolic – thus primarily cultural – revenge of the Low. "Senza pagare" fits this schema by playing with the figure of the social climber and, most importantly, challenging (or mocking) forms of 'proper' behaviour as opposed to supposedly authentic popular manners, cultural practices, and references. Like populism, however, the song does not question the root causes of social inequality.

An anti-bourgeois inspiration was also detected in our MGA session on Rumatera's 2011 song "La Grande V" ("The Big V," in reference to the Veneto region). Unlike the other songs and artists discussed here, neither "La Grande V" nor Rumatera are particularly well-known in Italy. The group does, however, enjoy significant support in Veneto,[4] the electoral stronghold of the League and traditionally the site of Venetian regional identity. In "La Grande V," according to one participant of our MGA:

> There is quite a tidy rock-metal sound, which merges perfectly with the guttural voices to describe how Venetian identity is depicted: harsh, rude, yet still spontaneous and warm. It is not the same warm-hearted hospitality you find in Southern Italy. . . it is warm because it is spontaneous. It is not only a call to 'accept who you are': it is a call to celebrate how other people describe you, and what in fact you are no longer. . . because such ruralist imagery does not really exist anymore (see the official video).
>
> *(Rumatera 2011)*

This is a perfect example of how the concept of the heartland applies to our study. As Paul Taggart (2012) argues:

> populism always draws on an implicit or explicit heartland – a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated, and non-political territory of the imagination. From the imagination of this 'place,' it tends to draw its values. And, it is from this territory that it draws its own vision of its natural constituency – unified, diligent, and ordinary.
>
> *(Taggart 2012, 1)*

Our MGA participants did not consider the song divisive, despite its obvious identitarian potential. "A non-Venetian guy would probably have fun in a concert, would even develop a good impression of Venetian people," because, they felt, such an impression was wholly consistent with existing stereotypes about Venetians. At the same time, this participant stated that "I feel a sort of repulsion towards this way of portraying Venetian identity, even if I had fun at their concerts [. . .] it really is a band that invites the audience into singalongs whilst drinking beer." This underscores the enormous proto-political potential of such popular cultural

productions: as Dahlgren has explored, cultural media afford "transitory glimpses, preliminary meanings, multiple frameworks, explanations, and narrative structures that may coalesce as political comprehension" (2009, 33).

As our MGAs demonstrated, and comparing Povia's "Chi comanda il mondo?" to the other songs analysed, popular cultural productions seem much more effective at spreading specific worldviews and values if they are not perceived to be overtly political or appropriated for political purposes. These messages become populist when they trace a boundary between an identity group defined territorially, or even ethnically, and an elite. This constitutes inclusionary populism when the elite being targeted is defined in terms of political or economic power, as Hunt tends to do, and exclusionary populism when (as we see in Rumatera's music) the implicit target is a cultural elite, at odds with the brash, masculine imagery associated with the people (the sociocultural, High versus Low dimension, as theorised by Ostiguy). It must also be noted that political-cultural structures of opportunity are at work here too: the 'raw Venetians' celebrated by Rumatera have historically so much been associated with the League that alternative (for instance, left-wing) territorial mobilizations of that sub-national identity becomes unlikely. One thing that is clear is that, to drive popular culture in a political direction, history matters.

Concertgoers: "I like him because he got what he wanted"

Populist phenomena entail a process of identification. This can operate vertically, for instance with a leader or party, or horizontally, with the people that an individual feels that they belong with. Both vertical and horizontal identification are key to understanding how music fandom – and, increasingly, political affiliation – work, as scholarship on "political fandoms" highlights (Erikson 2008). If "politics, like popular culture, is about creating an 'audience'" (Street 1997, 60), then the significant overlap between political and cultural fan communities ties in with the "emotional constitution of electorates that involves the development and maintenance of affective bonds between voters, candidates, and parties" (van Zoonen 2005, 66). We will discuss this in greater depth here.

Between April and November 2020, we conducted twenty individual, in-depth interviews with people who had attended concerts by relevant and well-known Italian popular artists. The artists were selected for their proximity to populism, either because they had publicly endorsed specific populist parties (J-Ax and Fedez, and the Neapolitan rapper Lucariello), or were widely associated with populist parties directly (Davide Van De Sfroos) or indirectly (the Venetian-rock band Rumatera). We have also included artists – the rappers Ghali and Fabri Fibra – whose back catalogues seemed well-suited to carrying populist messages and tropes in our preliminary analysis of popular songs from the 2009–2018 period (see previous section). We recruited our twenty interviewees (balanced in terms of gender, with three per artist apart from Rumatera, for whom there were only two), via posts on

Facebook fan pages and fan groups. As for their age, most of the fans of the rap artists in our sample (Ghali, Fabri Fibra, Fedez, J-Ax, Lucariello) were between 16 and 20, with only two fans of J-Ax and Fedez aged 25 and 40, respectively. Those recruited from Rumatera's and Davide Van De Sfroos' fans communities were (unsurprisingly, particularly in the case of Van De Sfroos) older, aged between 30 and 55 years old. We were generally able to recruit interviewees from various Italian macro-regions (Central North and South), except in the case of more locally-oriented artists (Lucariello, Rumatera, and Van De Sfroos, whose fan communities are based in Campania, Veneto, and Lombardy, respectively). Five of our ten interviewees older than 19 had some university education, but this dropped to two amongst Van De Sfroos' fans. During the interviews we asked about the following: 1) The main reasons for their passion for their specific singer/band; 2) their ideological and emotional dimensions; 3) the concert experience (in for example the space of interaction with other concertgoers, the body, their feelings during and after the event, etc.); and 4) their opinions about the political position of their singer/band in the public sphere.

One of our first questions was how interested – if at all – our interviewees were in Italian political life. Interestingly, none of the interviewees declared a particular interest in politics. Nor did any of them report that their fandom was a result of the political position of the artist or band discussed. In fact, most interviewees were hardly ever aware of their artist's politics, nor were they able to (or wished to) associate their artist/band with a specific party or ideology. Fans of certain artists (in particular J-Ax, Fedez, and Ghali) often made statements such as "I listen to them for pure entertainment. . . these are commercial hits. I don't believe in this way of spreading political messages." However, some of Fedez's fans argued that "he's not a typically politically engaged singer, he doesn't position himself as 'the expert,' and still he expresses his own opinion. I appreciate this, and in this way he's even more effective. However, in general, too much politics is boring." Such an opinion seems particularly relevant nowadays, when a distrust of political institutions and greater "anti-partisanship" are on the rise (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020).

The role of the artist as a non-expert who nevertheless engages with public issues was generally praised, as long as this did not imply becoming "political" or "partisan." It seemed enough that an artist had something "frank" to say: more than mere authenticity, we detected here a view of the artist as truth-teller, and truth-telling has indeed been identified as a key component of successful populist political communication (Sorensen 2021). However, the interviewees also described the values and imagery that they associate with – and that made them appreciate – their artist. These included a do-it-yourself, individualistic attitude, particularly in the case of the rap artists. These artists – all male – were seen by our interviewees as self-made men who have managed to succeed through sheer determination, despite socially difficult backgrounds. More generally, these artists were seen as positive examples, a source of inspiration more than someone to identify with, although in some

cases – particularly amongst fans of Fabri Fibra and Lucariello – strong mechanisms of identification were detectable.

> Lucariello is against the Camorra [i.e., the Italian Mafia in some regions], and he is someone who made it. The key message he transmitted? Just as he made it, we can make it. Through music, through football. . . whatever. It's a source of energy and optimism. He taught me to believe in something.

Our interviewees portrayed a social context in which collective action is almost invariably considered "useless," even "deleterious." Their reasoning was that:

> you have to fight, like Fabri Fibra, your own solitary battle. You identify with Fibra because, like him, you lack parental guidance, you have issues with your brothers and sisters, you have problems with girls and difficulty finding durable friendships. . . they despise any group [*collettivo*] because they don't trust the *collettivo*.

Furthermore, it was felt that "being part of a group implies following a leader, denying the expression of your own ideas. . . out of fear of being excluded or derided." However, several interviewees valued the experience of going to concerts precisely because it allowed them to realise that there are many other "excluded people like me." If populism entails the construction of a people through a process of identification, specifically *horizontal* identification emerged strongly from our interviews. This allows for the coexistence of individualist attitudes, and for a feeling of collective belonging that is not suffocating. What was completely lacking, however, was any sense of collective action as a valuable tool for change, whether political or individual. In fact, as far as the concertgoers are concerned, the aforementioned processes of identification may perhaps favour the spread of political distrust and a collective awareness of social exclusion, which was previously lived as an individual experience (on this, see Gerbaudo 2022). However, the belief in the uselessness of collective action, and the absence of any antagonism that pits the people against an elite makes tracing any parallels between this group of listeners and populism as a political phenomenon unwise.

Gender is also a major variable, and has been identified as a key dynamic in (right-wing) populist phenomena (Donà 2020). Commenting on criticisms of Fabri Fibra's crude lyrics, sexist language, and references to harassment and rape, a female interviewee said that "it is just his language, the language of the character he plays. Or he appears to be a misogynist because he needs a rhyme. He knows how people think because he comes from modest beginnings." For one male interviewee:

> it is similar to De André's song about a female forcing her suitor to kill his mother[5]. . . I mean, many artists have sung about toxic relationships, about

> psychological violence against females. . . but there is psychological violence against males, too.

Again, these claims fail to take into account structural power relations. When discussing Rumatera’s imagery, both male and female interviewees converged on the idea of (and identified with) a sort of “rural crassness” that “allows girls to be rude, to have fun by dismissing gender roles and expectations,” thus fully accepting sexist jokes and jargon. This reasoning led several interviewees to describe political correctness as a “major problem” or as “censorship,” a discursive terrain that is notoriously fertile ground for populism (Moffitt 2016). Perhaps more importantly, and unsurprisingly, fans of Fabri Fibra and Rumatera tended to reproduce and reify a cultural understanding of the people and the popular as the realm of masculine coarseness – considered valuable as a mark of authenticity – as well as to denounce feminist critiques as being “far from reality” and obscuring “psychological violence against males.” This line of argument is also typical of the populist radical right’s gender discourse (Kantola and Lombardo 2020).

The final dimension identified as highly significant, particularly for fans of dialect artists such as Lucariello (Naples), Davide Van De Sfroos (Lombardy), and Rumatera (Veneto), was the artist’s region. Certain interviewees considered the use of dialect to be “key,” a “crucial and necessary aspect” for their devotion to these artists, especially Lucariello and Rumatera. For Lucariello’s fans, dialect is “the language we normally use, and it is a Neapolitan marker, a Southern Italy marker. . . it helps make us proud in spite of all the social problems we have.” Rumatera’s fans, by contrast, emphasised the need to address *cultural* (instead of primarily *socioeconomic*) exclusion:

> If you don’t understand Venetian you miss out on a lot of things, a lot of jokes . . . it is obviously a key aspect in understanding why Rumatera are appreciated. Furthermore, Venetian is not like the Roman, Florentine, or Neapolitan accents that you can hear on TV. All of them are considered normal, our accent and our language are not, so it is a form of making our culture known, even in a parodic and self-satirising way.

As a female interviewee put it, “I am sympathetic towards the League, and Rumatera are not League supporters, they just want to have fun, but they celebrate our culture and I love this aspect.” In contrast, as one of Van De Sfroos’ fans argued: “I do not listen to him because he sings in dialect.” They went on: “I mean, he’s a storyteller offering a humble person’s point of view: so the use of dialect, the way humble people express themselves, is obvious”; “yes, there are some Lombardian fanatics linking him to the Northern League because of the dialect, but they are a minority amongst the fans; it is a characteristic marker of Van De Sfroos, but there is much more than this.”

In sum, the findings of our interviews are only partially relevant to an understanding of (populist) politics and its relationship to popular music in Italy. Different audiences – as well as different populist parties, as we will see in the next section – articulate their own vision of what constitutes ‘the people’ for them, each of which relies on some sense of authenticity. This resonates with some of the tenets of social identification theory (Sindic and Condor 2014); for our purposes, this relates to the reproduction and consolidation of populism in contemporary Italy through the mutual reinforcement of processes that constitute strong in-group identities against an out-group enemy. However, at the level of the individual, fans of populist artists – those that we identified above as potential carriers of populist messages – only rarely politicise their favourite songs, preferring instead to conceptualise the listening experience as intimate and private. Fans also assign the role of truth-teller to their favourite artist, one capable of unveiling injustices and articulating grievances, but again this goes no further than purely individual and individualistic solutions. Their output may contribute to the spread of populist tropes, even elevating them to the status of common sense, and the experience of attending their concerts may help fans to realise that they are not alone in suffering. But political (populist) articulations require populist entrepreneurs, who would take the raw matter of cultural material as a starting block and build on it. However, as we will see in the next section, one major populist entrepreneur – Matteo Salvini – does not so much invest in any specifically populist content within popular music as he builds on its definitional characteristic: that it is widely known and, as such, tacitly shared by all Italians. As we saw in the concert experience, it is popular music’s very ‘sharedness’ (or, when drawing dividing lines, the absence of sharing) that seems key.

The interactions between populist parties and the Italian pop music scene

There are several ways in which the popular music sphere and its multiple facets – the cultural productions *per se*, the public persona of popular stars, and the strategic uses made of music by politicians – can contribute to mainstreaming populism. This section will focus primarily on “celebrities in politics” (Street 2004). We will examine, especially in relation to the leader of the League, Matteo Salvini, the deliberate use of cultural productions (that is, popular music) and practices to construct and communicate certain messages to potential sympathisers. This may involve using concepts and tropes borrowed from popular culture (a culture familiar to all), or using music to build an in group-out group dynamic, such as between the people on the one hand, and the supposedly left-wing, intellectual, elitist singers, on the other.

The 2019 edition of the Sanremo festival was particularly interesting for the purposes of this chapter (for an analysis of Sanremo 2019, see Magaudda, 2020). It was marked by critiques from then 5SM leader Luigi Di Maio of the jury’s “elitism,”

as opposed to the "popular vote" which often awards different artists, and Matteo Salvini's thinly veiled xenophobia directed towards the Italo-Egyptian rapper Mahmood, that year's winner. In his tweet commenting on Mahmood's triumph, Salvini ironically asked: "#Mahmood. . . . . mmhhh. . . . . The most beautiful Italian song?!? I would have voted for #Ultimo, what do you think? #Sanremo2019" (Ultimo is a young singer fully in line with traditional ideas of the melodic Italian song) (Salvini 2019b). This triggered numerous xenophobic comments from his followers – arguably because of the singer's Arabic name – even though Salvini presented his position as merely a defence of Italian traditions, including in the popular music sphere (Mahmood's song was quite innovative in terms of sound for Sanremo's standards, and includes some lyrics in Arabic). Di Maio, instead, wrote in his official Facebook profile:

> The song I like most about Sanremo is this one and I hoped it would win. I've never been a fan of Cristicchi, but I'm listening to this song endlessly on Spotify. I really like it a lot. [. . .] I see that there is a lot of debate about the winner of Sanremo because the jury, composed of 'experts' such as the well-known journalist Beppe Severgnini, and the press room have totally overturned the result of the popular vote. The winner was not what the majority of the voters at home wanted, but what the minority of the jury, mostly composed of journalists and radical chic, wanted. [. . .] These are the ones more and more distant from the popular feeling and they have demonstrated it also in this Sanremo Festival. I congratulate Mahmood, Ultimo, and all the others. And I thank Sanremo because this year it made millions of Italians aware of the abysmal distance between the people and the 'elite' [. . .].
>
> *(Di Maio 2019)*

This episode can be seen to exemplify the adoption and adaptation of popular music by political actors in Italy and vice versa, which can be linked to the spread of populist political projects in the country. Our analysis of the interactions between populist political parties, their leaders, and popular music was enabled predominantly by a data mining process carried out via Google searches for specific combinations of keywords to cover the period 2010 to 2018. As relevant keywords, we chose: 1) the names of the two most important populist parties in Italy ("Five Star Movement" and "Northern League") and the word "populism" itself; 2) the names of the current leaders of each main Italian populist party ([Matteo] "Salvini" for the Northern League, and [Luigi] "Di Maio" for the Five Star Movement). Each of these keywords was combined with the words "music" and "singers" for a total of ten Google searches. We limited our data collection by focusing only on the first three results pages from each search.

Moreover, we also included the results from ten additional Google-based searches that focused on the publicly announced political opinions of popular artists that emerged as relevant for the present research following our analysis of

song lyrics, detailed above. We selected the results from the first page of each Google search, from the combination of the following keywords: "politics," with a politically relevant genre (for example, "trap"), and one of nine politically relevant contemporary popular artists: Fedez, J-Ax, Ligabue, Thegiornalisti, Jovanotti, Gué Pequeno, Ghali, Sfera Ebbasta, and Cesare Cremonini. This data collection strategy delivered a total of 347 web links (of which 163 were relevant to our research question). This allowed us to obtain information that was easily accessible to the general public, and thus, arguably, the kind of information that users would first encounter and use to form opinions. The links that we selected also provided information about certain policy proposals put forward by the League and M5S to the music industry.

As of November 2018, Matteo Salvini's official Instagram page was only following forty-five other accounts, including popular Italian musicians such as Giorgia, Bianca Atzei, Max Pezzali, Cesare Cremonini, and Vasco Rossi (all very well-known and between the ages of 40 and 60; none are generally considered politically engaged), plus the band Nomadi and Francesco De Gregori, leftist icons from the sixties/seventies. Salvini's public persona, in terms of music taste, could be described as a form of "spectacular commonness": this concept, coined to describe some elements of contemporary right-wing populism in Norway, consists of the "endorsement of aesthetic values and tastes associated with cultural expressions of low cultural legitimacy [in order to] be the true values and tastes of 'the people'" (Naerland 2016, 95). In a recent interview for an Italian journal (2019) Salvini revealed his music tastes to be a list of well-known artists (all were Italian) from the eighties and nineties, a period that corresponds with his youth.[6] The interview is filled with overtly common-sense statements: "I love Bocelli"; "to me, Sanremo is Morandi, Tozzi, Tenco"[7]; "in my Walkman I had Claudio Baglioni[8] when I was 15 years old, for my first love stories." Salvini further builds this spectacularly common persona when he admits to "not knowing who Achille Lauro [a young trap artist] is: I had to ask my son about him": one reads this statement as part of a communicative strategy to appear authentic, with overtly outdated tastes and a performative difficulty to keep up with younger generations (whilst managing to flaunt his relationship with his son). Salvini has also repeatedly shown a strong appreciation of Fabrizio De André, arguably the most famous Italian leftist songwriter, and one that the League tried (and failed) to appropriate by pointing to the regionalist focus on Sardinia and Liguria in his repertoire. In a Facebook post on the twentieth anniversary of De André's death, Salvini wrote "*All'ombra dell'ultimo sole/si era assopito un pescatore* . . . ["A fisherman falls asleep beneath the sunset"; emphasis in original] Goodbye Fabrizio, thank you poet!" (Salvini 2019a): the verse quoted is the beginning of one of De André's most famous songs, and again the kind of lyrics that many Italians would be familiar with.

The separation of music and politics is one of Salvini's main discursive and political strategies. As Tim Wall (2003, 47) has correctly stated, "even the argument that

pop music is 'just entertainment' is a political position because it seeks to define the role of popular music in society." This attempt to clearly demarcate music away from politics may be employed to avoid accusations of political extremism, such as when Emma Marrone, who had criticised the League's immigration policies, was attacked online by militant League supporters when she announced that she was ill: ("the cancer you have is well deserved" (Cursi 2019)): "I like Emma's songs; I'll send her a bunch of flowers. Ideas and personal suffering should be kept separate" (*Il Messaggero* 2019). This kind of strategy could be considered a form of consensus seeking, and has been consistently practiced by Salvini in other occasions when he publicly argued with popular leftist singers (Caiani and Padoan 2023: 153–154). Salvini also uses producerist (Rathgeb 2021) and anti-intellectual arguments to delegitimise political opposition, as well as to reproduce and reinforce the frontier between the people and its out-groups: this is visible in statements such as "May Day is the day of all the workers, not just the leftist workers, the leftist unions or the leftist singers" (*Open Online* 2019), in reference to the annual May Day Concert organised by the trade unions in Rome, or "Trump's lesson, the lesson from the free vote of Americans, is that you can win against everybody, against bankers, lobbyists, journalists, singers" (*Rai News* 2016).

In contrast to Salvini, the main figures of the M5S do not engage in public debates with popular artists. In particular, Luigi Di Maio (incumbent at the time of our research) was much more scrupulous than Salvini vis-à-vis the world of popular music. In line with the collegial and less personal image that the M5S wants to portray, in marked distinction to Salvini's League, there are no direct polemics between Di Maio and figures from the world of show business. In this sense, Di Maio's Facebook post on Mahmood's Sanremo victory is an exception. Nevertheless, that post still made clear that the leader of the M5S opted to politicise the singer's triumph much more explicitly, by directly evoking the contradistinction between the people on one side and the media and cultural elite on the other (since Mahmood was chosen by the jury, not the popular vote). Furthermore, and again in contrast to the League, the M5S enjoyed several endorsements from famous Italian popular musicians (particularly during the 2013–18 period). These were typically leftist singers (e.g., songwriters from the seventies, eighties, and nineties) who had come to feel betrayed by the institutional Italian left. Whilst many of these endorsements were withdrawn once Grillo's party embraced the League to form the so-called yellow-green government in 2018, it is worth noting that the M5S never mentioned these endorsements in its official communications, arguably to maintain its much-flaunted distance from such apparently unserious debates and focus instead exclusively on corruption. However, several of the media outlets unofficially working as propaganda organs for the M5S did celebrate the extent to which certain artists were "brave enough" to "challenge the media's single choir" and support the party (*Il Mattino* 2014).

As John Street (2014) argues, celebrity politics can refer either to the increasing political relevance of major popular artists in the public debate, or to the

exploitation, for political purposes, of the realm of popular culture by politicians (see also, on Italy, Campus 2020). In the first case, the media tends to pay more attention to the statements and opinions of popular artists, neither of which are necessarily reflected in their work. Popular artists thus use their privileged position within the media system to act as leaders of public opinion, sometimes presenting themselves as alternatives to professional politicians, whilst increasing their own visibility. In the second case, we can observe how politicians might act in a populist way, according to an understanding of populism as either a strategy of (direct and unmediated) mobilisation (Weyland 2001) or as a way of establishing a connection with a people by performing supposedly low sociocultural practices (Ostiguy 2018). This section has concentrated on this second understanding, that is, how populist politicians enter into allegedly unserious public debates that are not necessarily related to institutional politics. Rather, they do this to increase their visibility and circulate specific ideas in popular, fairly open, and innocent ways, so as to reach a broader audience and shape, produce, and politically exploit what Gramsci calls "common sense" (Caiani and Padoan 2021). As we shall argue in the conclusion, the different approaches of Salvini and Di Maio to dealing with popular music culture reflect their different constructions of 'the people.'

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the nexus between popular music and populism in the Italian context, a paradigmatic case in Europe for the study of populism's success and diffusion in the social and political spheres.

As we have sought to illustrate, one of the most important means through which popular music lends or, following DeNora, affords itself to the adoption and spread of populist ideologies in Italy is through the identification and, often, political appropriation of a supposed 'Italianness' in the national popular repertoire. Framing a song as Italian, a trend often (albeit not exclusively) associated with the Sanremo tradition, can either prevent the listener from recognising it as explicitly political or partisan, or allow for multiple (and diverging) political affordances. Our MGAs revealed Rocco Hunt's "Nu juorno buono" as an example of the former, and Emma Marrone's "Non è l'inferno" can be said to exemplify the latter, because of that song's contrast between a conservative idiolect and its call for social justice. The consequences of Hunt and Marrone's populist affordances are similar, as in both cases there is the construction of a broad and fairly ambiguous 'us' which the listener may identify with, bypassing ideological and partisan divides. In fact, as Andrew Arato states (2013, 160), central to populism is the intensity of the antagonism that it summons, implicitly or explicitly; this "compensates for the vagueness of [populist] ideology." Broadly speaking, therefore, this is what "the concept of populism entails in a popular culture context," to quote this volume's main research question: well-known and ideologically ambiguous

cultural repertoire, that are syncretic and open to multiple affordances, are used to build a frontier either against socioeconomic elites (in the case of inclusionary populism) or those who do not share the same supposedly traditional cultural references (people excluded from the category of 'cultural Italians,' in the case of exclusionary populism).

A song such as Povia's "Chi comanda il mondo?", which fits Mudde's description of populism as an ideology perfectly, was considered in our MGA session to address a fairly limited 'people' – a minority at the fringe of the political spectrum – and, as such, to have little real reach beyond that circle. In contrast to Povia, participants in our MGA were quick to associate Rumatera's "La Grande V" – a parodic song that plays with a territorial identity almost synonymous with the League (in this, there is also a contrast to be drawn with "Nu juorno buono") – with exclusionary populism, despite the song's *prima facie* lack of political claims.

As we saw in the previous section, it was the League's leader, Salvini, who mostly engaged in attempts to appropriate the Sanremo repertoire for political ends. Indeed, he did not stop here, declaring a strong appreciation for many other Italian songwriters, including those with avowedly left-wing convictions. The first strategy – appropriation of the Sanremo repertoire – is quite easy to understand: Salvini positioned himself as both a listener like any other, and defender of a specifically Italian musical tradition. The second strategy is subtler: we argue that his provocative, overt appreciation of some *cantautori* would not have been possible without the gradual de-politicisation of this music in the first place. Once divisive, this *cantautori* repertoire has been gradually canonised and transformed into a common cultural heritage: "from Gramsci to UNESCO," as Fabio Dei puts it (2016). If it is (and it should be) a common heritage, belonging to the people, then preventing someone from listening to and publicly appreciating this music reflects an elitist attitude, one said to be typical of the left. The move away from divisiveness had the unintended consequence of opening up more space for attempts at political appropriation. This is also reflected in Salvini's twofold communicative strategy in relation to artists that criticise him: Salvini praises their (politically innocuous) music whilst attacking them personally. The more it is depoliticised, therefore, the more popular music appears politically useful for populist operations.

The participants in our MGAs mostly detected potentially leftist-populist affordances in the Sanremo songs that they were asked to examine. Why then did the Five Star Movement not use that material? Whilst the League celebrates supposedly common, apolitical, and everyday tastes, the Five Star Movement, we argue, tends to flaunt a 'rocker' mentality and imagery. This is intended primarily as a rebuttal of commercialism, and to project an image of the party as 'inconvenient,' disturbing, even proudly disruptive. This image fits the dichotomy of low versus high which, according to the sociocultural approach to populism, is the core of the phenomenon and central to its success. As such, the political

appropriation of commercial music would contradict the self-image that the M5S has carefully built for itself.

Finally, we argue that it is precisely because of popular music's inherent ambiguity that the populist direction in which its political affordances can be taken depends very much on the specificity of the intermediation performed on it by political actors. One of this volume's primary interests is, after all, how audience interpretation can drive repertoires and performances in populist directions. As emerged from our research, most of our interviewees (fans and concertgoers of potentially populist artists) rationalised their music tastes by emphasising several elements connected to populist politics: from the positive role of truth-teller assigned to the artist as a public figure to the importance of territorial belonging as a form of mobilisation; from an anti-bourgeois celebration of the low in Ostiguy's sense, to self-identification in a fan community of the unheard and excluded. Even here, however, victimhood and aspirations to social mobility remain strictly at the individual level. To conclude, transforming the populist affordances of contemporary Italian popular music into the active adoption of a populist worldview requires a political elaboration that, only rarely, did our research detect in listeners.

Notes

1 The city of Trieste, central to nationalist discourses (as it was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and annexed to Italy in 1918), and its surroundings remained under Allied occupation until 1954, when the Yugoslavian-Italian borders were defined. Trieste went to Italy and most of the Istrian peninsula to Yugoslavia.
2 Matteo Salvini acted as Minister of Internal Affairs in the Italian government, called 'the government of change' (2018–2019).
3 For the purposes of our research, we added one or two people with a high level of formal musical education to each group. These included conservatory graduates, musicians, and workers in the music industry sector. This made for a higher level of debate, as these participants grasped certain technical aspects constructively and introduced them into the discussion.
4 "La Grande V"'s official YouTube video has reached nearly two million views. Rumatera regularly plays well-attended concerts in Veneto.
5 The reference here is to "La ballata dell'amore cieco" ("The ballad of blind love"), 1966; see feverpitch84 2010.
6 Newspaper article in "La Stampa," 9/02/2019.
7 Gianni Morandi and Umberto Tozzi are famous singers from the 1970s/80s who famously won the 1987 Sanremo edition with Enrico Ruggeri for their song "Si può dare di più." Luigi Tenco, a Genoese songwriter, infamously marked the 1967 Sanremo edition by committing suicide after having been excluded from the final.
8 A Roman songwriter from the 1980s, well known for his love songs.

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3

"I WANNA GET BACK HOME"

Performing a populist Austrian homeland in popular music

André Doehring and Kai Ginkel

Introduction: Musical 'homes'

The concept of 'returning home' has long been a major preoccupation of folk and popular music, from the travelling songs of journeymen, to the blues, to the first line in the chorus of the 1984 song "Fürstenfeld" by the Austrian group S.T.S, from which this chapter takes its title. The need to return implies a certain distance from where one's journey began, and from this distance, 'home' can become a romanticised space associated with good folk, customs, and food (see Wallnöfer 2019). By contrast, meanwhile, the situation 'here' may be felt to represent the exact opposite.

Popular music, given its broad appeal and dissemination, is particularly well-suited to communicating and sharing this sense of longing for a home, a feeling familiar to many. To be as attractive (or in the logic of the culture industry, as profitable) as possible, a musical home must be a place – made through sound – with which a large number of listeners can easily connect. As we will show, this can be further heightened in contexts that encourage listeners to identify certain specific temporal, geographic, and personal homes. Though initially virtual, therefore, such homes depend not only on the sounds used to create them, but also the historical materialities and situations of their reception (see Doehring and Ginkel 2022).

The idea of a home is closely related to the similarly emotionalised concept of the fatherland, and, as such, to the nation (Wodak 2020, 113). Here, home may be imagined as a space shaped by a homogenous culture that extends from the past into the future and across a clearly delineated national territory. This mirrors De Cleen and Stavrakakis' (2017, 312) conceptualisation of national identity as a shared territory, time, and space. As "homo" or "femina nationalis" (Wodak 2020, 114), people's national identity may also be defined against perceived Others and

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their ways of life. Such constructions often lead to a view of other national, religious, or political communities as threatening one's home. Wodak (2020) argues that this sort of nativism can lead to a conception of the nation as a body ("Volkskörper") that it is the job of politics to protect. She concludes that right-wing populism exercises a politics of fear ("Politik mit der Angst"; Wodak 2020), since it establishes and exploits this discursive situation.

The Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) – a party that has been classified as a key far-right populist actor in Europe (see Mudde 2019; Pelinka 2005) – clearly exhibits the four crucial characteristics of right-wing populism as identified by Lehner and Wodak (2020, 175–176): nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism; anti-elitism; authoritarianism; and conservatism/historical revisionism. While there is no doubt that these characteristics play a major role in the FPÖ's political strategy and media performances, it is peculiar that we do not find them directly expressed in the music played at its party events. Rather, the FPÖ's use of music tends to be much more ambiguous and subtle than one might expect. At their rallies, music is deployed not to cultivate a politics of fear, but to create a musical home for those who feel comfortable and empowered to perform it in public. It would be wrong to dismiss the role of music as a distraction from what 'really matters' here, i.e. populist politics. Indeed, we argue that the music in this setting, which we will refer to as the "mode of the beer tent" (see Doehring and Ginkel 2023), is an important part of the culture of populism in Austria. It playfully invites us to take sides and join in with collective musical practices, and, as such, lends itself to politicisation.

Consequently, our theoretical understanding of populism closely follows the discursive-performative focus as articulated by Moffitt (2020). We address populism as primarily a performative style which constructs, *in situ*, the people it claims to represent. In this, we also draw closely on De Cleen and Stavrakakis' (2017, 305) theoretical framework for understanding how populism and nationalism are related in establishing a political space governed by the conflict between high and low (the populist axis of 'the elite' against 'the people'), and in/out dynamics (the nationalist axis of national versus non-national identities). With regard to our empirical work on the Austrian case, their framework helps to grasp music's role in articulating populism and nationalism, currents that the populist far-right FPÖ often interprets in a nativist way. On one hand, 'the people' are set against 'the elite,' be it the EU in the FPÖ's 2019 EU election campaign, or the so-called jet set ("Schickeria") of Vienna or Brussels that the 2016 FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer claimed did harm to "the Austrian people" (see Wodak 2020, 27). On the other hand, 'the people' are also set against Others that are born outside of Austria (see Moffitt 2020, 39). This nativist process of othering is historically dynamic: Others were understood to be foreigners when Jörg Haider led the FPÖ, then Muslims under Heinz-Christian Strache, and now, under Herbert Kickl's current leadership, refugees that "Festung Österreich" ("fortress Austria") must be defended against, as was claimed on FPÖ election posters in late 2022.

The FPÖ, Austria's most important far-right populist party, has long recognised and capitalised on the power of music. For many years it has developed a mode of performing popular music in public that, as we will argue, has supported the normalisation of populism, nationalism, and nativism in Austria. What follows are two case studies of songs that we encountered during our fieldwork (participant observation at political and musical events) to illustrate the connections between popular music, the construction of home, and far-right populism in Austria. The first song, Rainhard Fendrich's "I Am from Austria" (1989), has historically been of central importance for the FPÖ and serves as a significant example of the party's remarkable relationship with popular music as a means of appropriating ideas of a national home as established in mainstream popular culture. The song evokes a specific Austrian homeland that everybody, from the government to football fans, may claim to represent. Our discussion and thick description of an FPÖ event deepens several of the topics related to an Austrian homeland by identifying a dedicated use of music by the party. In this chapter's final empirical section, we analyse "Fürstenfeld" by S.T.S as our second case study, after which we explore the political potential of 'coming home' in the context of music and right-wing populism.

Methodology

How does popular music create meaning? We consider musical meaning to be established in musical practice (Blaukopf 1984), or through "musicking" (Small 1998), encompassing both performance and reception. Given the current state and history of this field of research (as we will discuss below), we need a methodology that recognises sound (Wicke 2004) and reception as specific "material arrangements" (Schatzki 2002), i.e. the spatial surroundings and infrastructures that are an indelible part of musical performance.

Our focus on populist politics asks how 'the people' is constituted in specific situations. We address this in terms of the role of popular music and the situations in which it is performed and received, whether in party-political contexts or elsewhere. We trace the production of political meaning *in actu*, that is, we follow the actors of our field (Latour 2005); this often means the songs themselves. In accordance with actor-network theory (ANT), an actor can be anything that makes a difference – human or non-human, material or abstract. The ethnographic method of "following" (see Gobo 2008), applied in line with ANT, works as an "in situ sense-making and sorting out [of] relations and attachments" (Winthereik 2020). Therefore, our research not only follows human actors, such as politicians and musicians, but also highlights the agency of the most important non-human actor that we are considering, music, which appears across a variety of locations and contexts. We have identified these settings in accordance with a multi-sited approach which, rather than addressing "holistic representations of clearly bounded (small) groups," instead identifies "its inherently fragmented

and multiply situated research object across social worlds" (Nadai and Maeder 2005). As Latour points out, "[s]ocial action is [. . .] shifted or delegated to different types of actors which are able to transport the action further through other modes of action, other types of forces altogether" (Latour 2005, 70). In this sense, our chapter highlights the agency of music that we first encountered at FPÖ events in several different situations, all of which share several human and non-human actors.

At these events, we were interested not only in the choice of music, but also in the material arrangements complementing and supporting them. The songs, as the central actors, were proof that the FPÖ uses music that is widely popular in Austria. At the same time, we also noted certain material constants in terms of the spaces in which these events took place. We subsequently attended concerts and folk festivals, thus extending our field of research according to a theoretical sampling approach, and encountered numerous musical overlaps with election campaign events by the FPÖ.

We approach the field from a specific position. As authors, we both have backgrounds in higher education, and are both employed in academia. We are by no means close to the FPÖ and its politics; this is not only our personal stance, but has deeply informed the research process, as part of our self-conception as researchers requires our work to take a critical position. We have remained ambivalent about the music that we encountered in the field. Whilst we do not consider many of the songs here to be personal favourites, some have nonetheless touched us. The prototypical sites of our research, such as folk festivals or beer tents, are not places that we would visit in a personal capacity.

We addressed the musical affordances (DeNora 2003) of certain key songs from our fieldwork in Musicological Group Analyses (MGAs). Each of these sessions was made up of participants from our university workplace with Austrian, German, and British backgrounds. Although we share notable similarities in terms of education, the differences in our respective socialisation turned out to be an advantage for our analysis. After all, MGAs are designed to allow researchers to explore a wide range of possible interpretations, where meaning is not a fixed quality but a fluid scale in which subjective ideas and impressions are connected to interpretations of musical structure and sound. Our analyses were open-ended discussions about such possible meanings. Sessions lasted between two and three hours and resulted in further investigations into topics such as musical persona, harmonics, production/arrangement, and musical genre.

Opportunities for and constraints on cultural expression

To understand the interplay between popular music and populism in Austria, it is necessary to map the multiple opportunity structure that allows the mainstreaming of populism (and related discourses such as nationalism and nativism) in and via Austrian popular music today. Here, we address only those aspects that play a

central role in our case studies, including Austria's political history, the historical development of the FPÖ, the country's media landscape, and the Austrian popular music market.

Historical and cultural opportunity structure

From 1933 to 1938, Austria was in a period of corporate statism, referred to as Austrofascism. In March 1938, Adolf Hitler passed the annexation law; Austria thus became part of the German Reich and stayed this way until 1945. After the end of the war, the country was divided into occupation zones until it regained full sovereignty in 1955; it has been a parliamentary democracy ever since. The period from 1945 to the present is referred to as the Second Republic.

Today, Austria has a population of 8.9 million and, despite its membership in the European Union since 1995, is not a NATO member but a neutral country, a status that is regularly the subject of discussions spearheaded by (and beneficial to) the FPÖ, for example, most recently in terms of potential support for Ukraine following Russia's military invasion in 2022. As a neutral state, Austria has often played a fairly minor role in world politics, but has nevertheless been important as a mediating force. For example, the fact that one of the UN's four major office sites is located in Vienna lends the Austrian capital a certain international cachet. Moreover, Austria is a relatively wealthy country with a high standard of education. It also shares the same language as Germany, although there are ongoing rivalries with the neighbouring state, which is ten times larger in terms of population.

More recently, independent candidate Alexander van der Bellen (formerly of The Greens) won the 2017 federal presidential election in a close-run contest against FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer. December 2017 also saw the beginning of the coalition government between the centre-right conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right populist FPÖ under chancellor Sebastian Kurz; as such, the FPÖ was part of the Austrian government when we started our research in March 2019. This government fell apart in May 2019, however, when a secretly recorded video emerged in which Heinz-Christian Strache – then vice chancellor and FPÖ leader – could be heard discussing party funding and potentially corrupt press holdings with a woman posing as the niece of a Russian oligarch. Following an interim government and new elections, the ÖVP entered into a coalition government in 2020 with The Greens (Die Grünen), whilst the FPÖ returned to opposition. Kurz finally resigned in 2021 amid allegations of corruption. There was also widespread dissatisfaction with the government's handling of Covid-19 during Kurz's time in government and beyond under chancellors Schallenberg (October to December 2021) and Nehammer (since 2021), which the FPÖ (under its current leader Herbert Kickl) were quick to capitalise upon.

Alpine topographies appear to be highly important in constructions of Austrian national identity, and are present even in the country's national anthem,

the first line of which is "Land der Berge" ("land of mountains"). Another phenomenon relevant to the cultural landscape here is the significance – and re-popularisation – of pseudo-traditional costumes known as Trachten, usually associated with the customs and culture of rural communities. Indeed, the popular Austrian singer Andreas Gabalier (see Dunkel and Kopanski in this volume) has served as something of a 'brand ambassador' for the recent resurgence of these costumes. With its nostalgic overtones, this phenomenon also reflects the glorification of anything associated with the generation of 'our grandparents.' This in turn ties notions of the Austrian homeland to costumes and place, and this is not without a certain political charge, given the historical links between Alpine imagery and national socialism (see Wallnöfer 2019). A culture of the Alpine even prevails in Austria's two largest cities, Vienna and Graz, despite the absence of any such topography there.

Political opportunity structure

The predecessor to the FPÖ was the Verband der Unabhängigen (Federation of Independents), a party made up of former National Socialists who did not have the right to vote in the first National Council elections in 1945 (Reiter 2019). The FPÖ was then founded in 1955. As a small coalition partner, the FPÖ has been represented in four federal governments since 1983. To add to the complexity of these matters, and following Rivero's (2019, 287) assessment of the "chameleonic nature of European populism," the FPÖ did not start as a populist party; rather, it could initially be characterised as a "pan-Germanic liberal-conservative party" (Rivero 2019, 287). Under the leadership of Jörg Haider from 1986 to 2000 – a period which involved the development of a specific use of music by the party (see below) – the FPÖ slowly turned into a far-right populist party (Reiter 2019, 286) with a nativist orientation (see Wodak 2020, 303). Today, "it is no longer a supranational party but an Austrian nationalist party that blames foreigners for the predicaments of Austria" (Rivero 2019, 287).

An understanding of Austria's political history is crucial to any examination of the right-wing populist and nationalist tendencies that have developed in recent years, both in party politics and beyond. Scholars have developed critical perspectives to study the ways in which politicians and the Austrian public have dealt (or failed to deal) with the country's national socialist and Austrofascist past (Pelinka et al. 2008). Of particular significance here is the widespread and largely unchallenged victim theory or victim myth ("Opfermythos") regarding Austria's active involvement in national socialist politics (Winkelbauer 2018).

There are also personal and ideological connections between the FPÖ and right-wing student fraternities in Austria (Scharsach 2017). There have been press reports about the distribution within these fraternities of songbooks with extreme nationalist content, or the infamous "Rattengedicht" ("rat poem"),[1] all of which echo the dehumanising language of past fascist regimes in German-speaking

countries (see Klemperer 1947). These incidents represent a continual pattern of behaviour for the FPÖ that has characterised it since its beginnings (Reiter 2019), and that show that the party "does not draw a clear dividing line in its political practice. More than seventy years after the end of National Socialism and more than sixty years after the founding of the party, the past is still lingering, from which – it seems – one cannot and will not break away" (our translation) (Reiter 2019, 287).[2]

When we began our research in 2019, the public appearance of the FPÖ had for many years been shaped by Strache, who led the party from 2005 to 2019. In a 2019 documentary by the Austrian public service channel ORF (*Im Brennpunkt: H.C. Strache – Aufstieg und Fall*), Strache is characterised as a politician who has gone through major changes over the years: from rebellious opposition leader with a neo-Nazi past (Scharsach 2012) to comparatively moderate in government, to finally becoming embroiled in major scandals towards the end of his career as vice chancellor and party leader.

The personality cult for which Strache became known first played a role in the FPÖ under Jörg Haider (Pelinka et al. 2008). Known as a populist, Haider stood for the rejection of the European Union (see Wodak 2013 on the "Haiderisation" of Europe), and his political style still influences FPÖ party politics today. He succeeded in addressing a broad spectrum of the Austrian population, a practice later continued by Strache. The latter has a less respectable image than Haider, partly due to his association with right-wing extremists, some of whom are convicted criminals. Nevertheless, Strache has managed to achieve a remarkable degree of popularity since the mid-2000s.

The FPÖ's representation of itself has been paradoxical. Despite their posing as a non-mainstream party, the FPÖ cannot be said to exist outside the mainstream of Austrian party politics, as the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition has shown. Indeed, our observations confirm that the FPÖ has mastered the oscillation between mainstream acceptance and extreme positions very effectively. It is also remarkably good at setting the political agenda that other parties must then follow. The party has, for example, deployed several notable campaign slogans, one of the most flagrant of which was "Österreich normal" ("Make Austria normal") in 2021. It is worth remarking that other European populist parties have also created similar slogans, such as "Deutschland. Aber normal" ("Germany. But normal"), used by the German far-right populist Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany).

Media and musical opportunity structures

To understand the cultural climate in Austria that allows the normalisation of far-right political tropes through populist politics, it is important to look at the country's media landscape, with its relatively high number of media outlets associated with right-wing politics. These include several high-circulation tabloid newspapers (*Kronenzeitung*, *heute*, *OE24/Österreich*), some of which are given away for free.

There is also a high number of conservative newspapers (for example, *Die Presse* and *Kurier*), whilst the number of more or less left-wing newspapers (such as *Der Standard* and the weekly *Falter*) is much smaller. Interestingly, during our study period, support from the ÖVP-led government (2017–2021) was very one-sided, with government advertising distorting the media market in favour of the tabloid press (Der Standard 2021). There are several private infotainment TV channels such as *OE24 TV* (which belongs to tabloid newspaper *Österreich*) and *ServusTV* (belonging to Red Bull Media House GmbH[3]); the latter is known for showing schlager music, sports events, and talk shows. Finally, there are several media outlets with close(r) ties to the FPÖ and/or right-wing groups and student fraternities, such as *unzensuriert.at*, *Alles Roger*, and *Aula*.

The publicly funded Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) has three TV and four radio stations, with the radio broadcaster FM4 dedicated in large part to Austrian pop music. ORF has been subject to ongoing attacks from FPÖ politicians over the years, highlighting the party's tendency to intimidate public service broadcasting in favour of media outlets closer to the FPÖ's politics. As such, the FPÖ has repeatedly denigrated public broadcasting fees as illegitimate and called for their abolition (FPÖ TV 2020). The party has also frequently accused ORF of political bias.[4]

From time to time, FPÖ politicians themselves have made musical appearances. As provincial governor, Jörg Haider sang Carinthian songs in front of a rural backdrop by a cottage in the mountains (with the performance broadcast on ORF, no less) (Holimot1 2012). For his part, Strache produced a number of rap songs for several political campaigns in the 2010s (OesterreicherZuerst 2010). This is a remarkable, but ultimately marginal, phenomenon. Beyond these isolated interventions, what really distinguishes the FPÖ's overall use of music from that of other parties is their mode. As part of our fieldwork, along with attending concerts and folk festivals, we visited many FPÖ campaign events. Strikingly, all of the Freedom Party events that we visited were conducted in the mode of the beer tent, which we take to refer to certain material arrangements. These include the use of beer benches, the provision of free beer, and the performance of folksy schlager music even when the event is held in a large market square in an urban centre. The FPÖ has created its own tradition of this mode: around thirty years ago, Jörg Haider discovered the John Otti Band, a Carinthian covers band, and hired them for party events. Since then, the John Otti Band has been the in-house band of the FPÖ and performed for a range of politicians, from Jörg Haider to Strache to Herbert Kickl.

Whilst there is an obvious predilection for certain topics, such as rural life or ideas of an Austrian homeland, the musical selections made by the FPÖ[5] for their campaign events do not come across as aggressive or politically extreme. On the contrary, the music at these events appeared friendly, fun, engaging, and even relatively inclusive. It is worth recognising here that our experience was as fleeting participants who did not stand out in terms of potentially conspicuous characteristics

such as skin colour, and thus had no reason to feel directly intimidated by the gathering.[6] Whilst Lehner and Wodak (2020, 175–176) describe FPÖ politicians, especially the “charismatic” leader figures Haider and Strache, as taboo-breaking and provocative in their political conduct, the music at their events struck us as downright inoffensive.

An examination of Austria’s popular music market will prove useful to comprehend what the FPÖ is able to articulate through its use of music. Since the 1970s and 1980s, artists such as Udo Jürgens, Falco, Opus (“Live is life”), Rainhard Fendrich, S.T.S, and Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung (EAV) have gained widespread popularity in Austria beyond the classical music tradition. More recently, Austrian popular music has changed and become increasingly diverse. One such example is the drag queen and Eurovision winner Conchita Wurst. There has also been the emergence of popular TV shows such as *Starmania*, and Austria now has several large popular music festivals, including *Novarock*, *Popfest*, and *Donauinselfest*.

For German-speaking countries more broadly, the popularity of schlager music is highly characteristic (Mendívil 2015), and with the advent of popular singers such as Andreas Gabalier, Hannah, and Melissa Naschenweng, the genre is increasingly reaching younger audiences in Austria (Dobler 2021). Apart from this, however, there is another relevant realm of popular music, one that is entirely unique to Austrian popular music in terms of historiography. Over the years, the term Austropop has been established (and sometimes challenged) by journalists and popular music scholars to refer to Austrian popular music outside of the schlager genre (see Huber 2013).

The recent past has seen several projects dedicated to establishing an official, or in some way legitimate, history of what Austropop actually is (Fürnkranz 2020). Examples include the Viennese exhibition “Ganz Wien” (2017, named after a seminal Falco song) and journalist Rudi Dolezal’s (2006–2008, 2011) multi-part documentary for ORF called *Weltberühmt in Österreich – 50 Jahre Austropop* (“World-famous in Austria – 50 Years of Austropop”) that favours a particularly broad (some might say overwhelming) perspective on Austropop and in which the demarcation of the genre focuses less on music and sound than nationality. The term Austropop has come to signify retrospective commercial marketing of Austrian pop music history, as Reitsamer and Prokop (2012, 9) point out. The authors distinguish between the Austropop genesis in the 1970s and a later redefinition of Austropop that hones in on patriotic notions, as exemplified by the song “I Am from Austria,” which we will discuss as one of our case studies.

The Austrian music market, though it boasts many smaller independent labels, is dominated by multinational corporations such as Warner Music Austria, Sony Music Entertainment Austria GmbH, and the Universal Music Group (Schmid 2020). Music sales, having fallen continuously in the period from 2016, have now begun to pick up again. In 2020, the Austrian music industry recorded profits of around €171.6 million, an increase of 3.4% compared to the previous year (Turulski

2022). As far as radio is concerned, Austria has a number of large public stations; one such is FM4, whose slogan – "You're at home, baby" – reflects the apparent scaling-down of its international profile to target the Austrian market.

It would appear that this moderate growth is mostly due to an increase in streaming (see IFPI 2020, 8). However, according to a 2018 industry report (IFPI 2018), popular music from Austria is facing significant growth problems. Album sales for Austrian artists are in decline (though there was a singular rise from 18% to 24.9% in 2022, due to the success of Austrian rap artist RAF Camora, cf. IFPI 2020, Bacheler et al. 2023), and the share of sales for singles by Austrian musicians stands at 5% (dropping to 3.6% in 2022, cf. IFPI 2020, Bacheler et al. 2023). The market is heavily dependent on the live sector which, during most of our research, was struggling due to the pandemic. Furthermore, Austrian music sung in a local accent does not sell well internationally. Within the German-language market, significant commercial success for Austrian musicians is rare and mostly limited to a few popular singers in the folksy schlager genre. Even the music of Andreas Gabalier, though very popular in the German-speaking world, struggles to surpass the success he has already achieved, and any prospect of Gabalier tapping into the Anglo-American music market seems highly unlikely. Herein lies a structural, language-based problem facing the Austrian music scene.

If the use of music at FPÖ events was strictly about popularity, could they not just play a selection of hits from the current Austrian Top 20, instead of their usual combination of evergreens from rock, Austrian folksy schlager, and country music? Why, one might wonder, play music that has long been economically stagnant and that, moreover, tends to come across as provincial? To suggest that the music selected for the FPÖ's events constitutes a potential disadvantage because of its economic performance would, however, miss the point, which is to performatively establish a norm. The political use of music in this way can in fact only be advantageous when the message is essentially 'here you still get to hear real Austrian music.'

Case study 1: The making of a nation through music

Our first case study addresses a song that is well-known in Austria and that paints a specific image of Austrian identity for many people. It had initially crossed our path as researchers during the pandemic, when it was played in public spaces to create a sense of national unity. It then came to our attention that the song had also been used at FPÖ events, until its singer – Rainhard Fendrich – took legal action to stop it being played in this context. We therefore decided to follow the actor, in accordance with actor-network theory, and reconstruct the different stages of the song's political use. Fendrich is easily one of the most popular singers in Austria. Arguably his biggest hit, the song discussed here is "I Am from Austria" (1988), whose origins in the wake of the Waldheim affair are worth briefly examining.

The Waldheim affair is a central chapter in Austria's post-war history, and is particularly relevant to the country's much-discussed failure to properly confront its role in the national socialist era. The affair began in the run-up to the 1986 presidential elections, when it was proven that Kurt Waldheim – presidential hopeful and former Secretary-General of the United Nations (1972–1981) – had not only been a member of the SA but, as a Wehrmacht officer, must have known about the mass deportations and murder of the Second World War, and had remained silent ever since. Rather than resign following the revelation, Waldheim instead spoke of defamation and affirmed that he, "like hundreds of thousands of Austrians," had only been carrying out his "duty" (our translation, quoted in Lackner 2016). This contributed in no small way to Waldheim's election victory in June 1986 (demokratie zentrum 2021), and echoed the sentiments of former Wehrmacht soldiers in Austria, a group that FPÖ party leader Haider courted as the party's target group.[7]

The Waldheim affair caused an international uproar. As the Austrian news magazine *Profil* wrote in 2007, "[Waldheim's] role in the Second World War, which he suppressed and kept quiet about, became the tragic life theme of the late former Federal President"[8] (our translation) (Lackner 2016). The article concluded, based on journalist Hubertus Czernin's detailed research into the information available at that point: "Kurt Waldheim was no war criminal, but he had been in spatial and temporal proximity to Nazi atrocities; he had been too insignificant to be able to give orders or prevent massacres. But he must have seen what was going on around him in the merciless war in the Balkans"[9] (our translation) (Lackner 2016). The FPÖ capitalised on the affair, as Haider provoked a break-up of the SPÖ-FPÖ coalition in 1986, only to emerge stronger than before in terms of voter support.

In an interview with the Austrian newspaper *Kurier*, Fendrich recounts how "I Am from Austria" came into being, directly addressing the Waldheim affair:

> The song was written in 1988/'89, after [sic] the Waldheim affair, which many people who wave flags and sing "I Am from Austria" today can't even remember. [. . .] It was possible to prove [Waldheim] had a Nazi past, at least that he was in the SA. And he handled his past very poorly.
>
> The result was that Austria was seen as a Nazi country internationally. And many Austrians were ashamed of this and denied their own identity. [. . .] I thought that was terrible, and that's why I wrote a song. But the song was criticised as nationalistic and was hardly played on the radio at first. But it was never meant to be nationalistic. It simply hurt my feelings that Austria was being denied [. . .]. And because Austria was badly portrayed all over the world, I deliberately sang the chorus line in English: "I am from Austria."[10] (our translation)
>
> *(Tartarotti 2016)*

As we can see, Fendrich reacts to the international uproar caused by the Waldheim case, which was due in large part to a documentary called *Waldheim: A Commission of Inquiry*, aired on American TV in 1988 (whilst German and Austrian broadcasters declined). Other international musicians were inspired by the affair. Lou Reed, for instance, wrote a song named “Good Evening, Mr. Waldheim” that featured on his album *New York* (1989). The song’s lyrics, although cryptic, are decidedly critical. It is also worth noting the difference in style between “Good Evening, Mr. Waldheim” and Fendrich’s “I Am from Austria”: the former is upbeat with a minimalist rock instrumentation over which Reed rants, rather than sings, the lyrics. In sound, gesture, and sentiment, therefore, plus its overtly confrontational attitude towards Waldheim, Reed’s song could hardly be further from Fendrich’s composition.

Two more songs to address the Waldheim affair came from the popular Austrian band Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung (EAV), who in the 1980s produced chart-topping, catchy pop music with a satirical approach to social criticism. These songs were 1988’s “Kurti” (alluding to the band’s earlier hit “Burli,” and a common nickname of Waldheim’s first name Kurt) and “Wann man geh’n muß” (“When You Should Leave”) of the same year. The latter is ostensibly a cover of Falco’s international hit “Rock Me, Amadeus” (1985), but addressed Waldheim directly through new, politicised lyrics (Rösing 2004, 161) challenging him to resign. Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung’s use of an internationally popular Austrian song (the Falco original) was such an effective vessel for the message that Waldheim himself threatened the band with a lawsuit.[11]

In contrast to these examples, which reflect the range of receptions of the Waldheim Affair in popular music, Fendrich opted for musical means that allow neither an obviously critical – as in the case of Reed – or satirical – as in the case of EAV – position. Instead, “I Am from Austria” suggests an obvious interpretation as being a song about heritage, with its natural metaphors such as “I am your apple, you are my trunk” (“I bin dei Apfel, du mei Stamm”). It is therefore no surprise that it has had an impact in FPÖ circles. In an interview with the website *popmagazin*, for example, FPÖ politician Dominik Nepp said that he is so familiar with “I Am from Austria” that he knows the lyrics by heart (Miggl 2020). The FPÖ had been interested in “I Am from Austria” to the point of playing it at their rallies, until Fendrich legally prohibited this, as mentioned above.

The song’s lyrics go from one musical-lyrical image to another. These are often natural in character, such as mountains, streams, and trees, and are musically underlined by chimes, delayed guitar arpeggios, and a production style that creates huge reverb spaces through a wide stereo sound. Musically (as well as in the music video, see Rainhard Fendrich 2013), the song paints Austria as an Alpine landscape, an image that some of our MGA participants considered narrow and clichéd, as it reproduces an image of Austria almost identical to the one popularised by *The Sound of Music* (1965).

It is obvious that "I Am from Austria" is capable of moving listeners profoundly, and in various political contexts. In 2016, Fendrich officially endorsed the presidential candidate Alexander Van der Bellen, whom he allowed to use the song during the months of campaigning. During the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, police cars circulated playing the song through loudspeakers to remind people to stay inside (BobStar 2020). Social media channels and radio encouraged the population to sing "I Am from Austria," sometimes referred to as the "unofficial national anthem" (our translation) (Kurier 2020), on their balconies every evening at a given time, and children were taught it in school. In spring 2021, participants at demonstrations against Covid measures in Austria sang it regularly, much to the chagrin of Fendrich.[12]

In our MGA, we elaborated on the features of "I Am from Austria" that encourage people to sing along. With the exception of an instrumental intro and a four-bar interlude, Fendrich sings right the way through "I Am from Austria." Two participants described how the two-bar introductory riff, played on fretless bass, is immediately recognisable to many in Austria who sing along with it whenever the song is played, be it at a private party, a concert, a sporting event, or a demonstration. Here, even before the lyrics begin, "I Am from Austria" offers up a hook – a well-known musical tool for popularising music – that reappears at the end of each chorus as a confirmatory emphasis on the song's title. Taking part in the MGA, we – who grew up in Germany – found it hard to grasp how such a wordy and melodically complex song (with the chorus' repeated eight-bar pattern underpinned by an irregular chord structure) might lend itself to singalongs. The MGA participants who were born and raised in Austria, however, found this view hard to understand. They described "I Am from Austria" as a ubiquitous song that "always seemed to be there." We can see how the song affords popularisation through its musical means. At the same time, the song has been popularised within Austrian culture as an evergreen, establishing its afforded ideas of Austrian culture over time.

Several participants emphasised the song's high-quality production.[13] Everyone agreed that the vocals, arrangements, and mixing are very elaborate. As the two participants who grew up in Germany (and also noticeably older than most of the other participants), we were reminded of Paul Simon's album *Graceland* (1986), due to the use of reverb and the prominence of fretless bass. Simon worked with South African musicians to integrate elements from their musical culture into the album's production. For the Austrian group members, however, the sound of the fretless bass in "I Am from Austria" was reminiscent of brass instruments such as the tuba or trombone, both of which they associated with Austrian folk music and the brass bands of the countryside.

In our MGA, two interpretative approaches were apparent. Some of our participants concluded that Fendrich, despite the use of certain stereotypical extreme-right buzzwords such as "blood," "pride," and "glory" (Blut, Stolz, and Ruhm, respectively), does not sound like a diehard patriot. Rather, they identified

a somewhat ambivalent position, less decisive than most uses of the song suggest. It seemed to these participants that Fendrich, with his soft and contemplative delivery, accepts his love for his homeland with something more akin to resignation than patriotic fervour: "Ain't no use pretending / That's where I come from, that's where I belong" ("Da kann ma machen, was ma wü / Da komm i her, da g'her i hin"). Other participants, however, disagreed with this interpretation. They heard a dedicated patriot singing with pride in the tenor range. This interpretation was, they felt, further strengthened by the impression that the music has a cinematic quality supported by the sonically expansive sound. Indeed, the use of reverb and a wide range of frequencies create a large, wide space in which the listener finds themselves, such as, for example, the mountains. This was strengthened still further by the string arrangements which some participants described as sounding "epic."

In the end, the prevailing interpretation depends on specific situations and practices. Both interpretations described here are plausible, as contradictory as they may seem. The idea of Austria that emerges from "I Am from Austria" is as either a country blessed with natural beauty and heartfelt sentiment but torn apart by politics, or a nation of past glory (likely the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, though this is not explicitly referenced) that every Austrian (i.e. Austrian citizens, or those born in Austria) cannot but defend "against the wind." Although Fendrich may have intended the song as a criticism of the country and its (foreign) critics (this is why he sings the title line in English), both interpretations lend themselves to the populist appropriation of defending the nationalist home against malevolent and unwanted forces from outside and, at the same time, closing ranks on the inside.

Thick description: Blue Monday with the FPÖ

If interpretations depend on situations and practices, and the FPÖ is able to use music even contrary to its intended meaning, we need to examine the FPÖ's use of music in its performative setting. This is particularly relevant when one considers the lengths to which the FPÖ goes to carefully choose and arrange spaces for its rallies. What follows is a thick description of an FPÖ campaign event. The episode illustrates the interplay between musical performance and political practices in a specific spatial context which informs the interpretation of music *in situ*. We visited a funfair towards the end of summer 2019 in rural Krems an der Donau, Lower Austria. The FPÖ had booked an entire beer tent for the purpose of an event called Blauer Montag (Blue Monday); blue is the party colour, while in German "blau sein" ("being blue") refers to the state of being drunk; "blau machen" ("making blue"), in turn, refers to skipping school or work, maybe after a drunken night out. The beer tent in question was one Franky's Bierstadl ("Franky's beer barn"), this name referring to its rural setting. Our field notes (originally taken by Kai Ginkel) are quoted below, having been edited and added

to, and draw on both our initial notes and memos. They were translated by us from German into English.

Wachauer Volksfest, August 2019

> Arriving at beer tent Franky's Bierstadl, I find myself in an Oktoberfest ambience: with dark wood panelling, beer benches, a tent festival atmosphere. Outside the merry-go-round is spinning, whilst inside the tent staff are serving meat and mugs of beer to the audience of approximately 200 visitors. The staff of Franky's Bierstadl are wearing blue plaid shirts with "Franky's" written on the back, and some of them are wearing leather trousers. There are also one or two female waitresses in everyday clothes.
>
> The Hot Dogs, a cover band from Lower Austria's Waldviertel region, are getting up on stage. They consist of four men (bass, guitar/vocals, keyboards/vocals, drums) and one woman (vocals). The men have all painted their calves in red-white-red colours (the colours of the Austrian flag), so it almost looks as if they are wearing national-coloured knee socks. In a style reminiscent of popular Austrian singer Melissa Naschenweng, the singer is wearing a pair of both traditional and hot pant-like leather shorts. Throughout the first couple of songs from the German-language folksy schlager spectrum, the band asks the audience for a show of hands, a common participation game during tent festival events. On several occasions the band also expresses their support for the FPÖ during announcements, making it clear they are committed to the cause and not just 'hired guns.'
>
> One of the following songs is "3,000 Jahre" by folksy schlager band Die Paldauer, a song often played at FPÖ events. Excerpt from the lyrics (our translation): "If only I were alive for one or two or three thousand years."[14] Of course, these lyrics are about couples' relationships, but in the right context the song can be interpreted politically, as I do in this situation. Band members are shouting out between the lines: "Where are the friends of the FPÖ?",[15] with the audience responding with loud cheers. The song "I' will leb'n" ("I Want to Live", sung here in Austrian dialect as "I wü lebm"), originally by Styrian pop-rock band Steirerbluat ("Styrian Blood"), is announced with the words that people can only really "live well" with the help of the FPÖ. A little later, some audience members in the front rows climb on their beer benches, dance, and clap along to the music.
>
> After the march "Dem Land Tirol die Treue" (1955),[16] one of the band members announces: "It's almost time,"[17] time for the political guests to arrive. But before they finally appear, everybody is asked to raise their hands – "all hands up" ("Alle Hände nach oben"), because: "We are one big family!" ("Wir sind eine große Familie"), referring to the 1970s song by popular Austrian singer-actor-entertainer Peter Alexander that was the signature song of recent FPÖ campaigns. Whilst the song is being performed, the political stars enter the

Bierstadl from the main entrance, parading past the rows of spectators, with large Austrian and Lower Austrian flags.

First to speak is Udo Landbauer, whose standing at the national level is at this point still marked by the so-called "songbook affair."[18] Next is Gottfried Waldhäusl, who had been a provincial councillor in the Lower Austrian government since 2018. He became known via the nationwide news through his handling of the Drasenhofen refugee camp for refugee minors that he had modified into a prison-like facility surrounded by barbed wire. In December 2018, Waldhäusl, originally a farmer, was charged with deprivation of liberty and abuse of authority. Now, at Blauer Montag, Waldhäusl is literally shouting into the microphone: if it was for reasons like these, he would gladly be charged with abuse of authority! The audience breaks into cheers, making me feel uneasy.

Amidst the cheering, the former national Minister of the Interior Herbert Kickl enters the stage. One of his topics, delivered in a fierce and at the same time humorous manner, is the police, who he defends against criticism as they are, he insists, "our men and women, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters" ("unsere Männer und Frauen, Väter und Mütter, Söhne und Töchter"). The image of the family is present here. Then he addresses "the refugees," who he says are "full of testosterone," so that "our women" no longer dare to leave their homes after dark. Also, Kickl is full of praise for Waldhäusl, because "he does not give a shit, in plain language" ("der scheißt sich nichts, auf gut Deutsch gesagt") – again, cheers.

After Kickl's speech, shouts of "Herbert, Herbert" can be heard, followed by the return of the Hot Dogs to the stage. One of the band members now declares that "Herbert" had persuaded them to play for another hour. The guitarist raises his beer and toasts the audience after which the band starts to play "Fürstenfeld" by S.T.S, a 1980s Austrian evergreen about the protagonist's longing to get back to his home, the small town of Fürstenfeld. This musical appreciation of the rural area goes down well here in the town of Krems. For the beginning of this encore, there is a beer tap in front of the stage, which had been announced several times before, with free beer handed out to the audience. Kickl, Waldhäusl, and Landbauer are out in front right next to the audience, ready for a handshake or a selfie.

This episode depicts a beer tent atmosphere produced through material arrangements including furniture, food products, and the waiters' outfits. Call-and-response games between band and audience show us that there are implicit rules intrinsic to this space, and that they are familiar to most attendees who can readily engage with them. It is important to note that in one such game, the band addressed the audience as "friends" of the FPÖ, which is evidently much more familiar and informal than calling them, for example, voters or sympathisers. This fits the performance of Peter Alexander's song "Wir sind eine große Familie," which emphasises bonds

beyond lineage. Musically, the message is that 'we have become one big family': in this beer tent, the audience is encouraged to feel that 'we' are at both a concert and a political event, we are actively taking part, and that we share the same values because we have the same home.

As researchers, we found it challenging to examine music used to co-create a setting in which the former Minister of the Interior can praise lawbreaking and promises his vision of the good life "for 1,000 years," which in this specific context reminds us of the National Socialist Thousand-Year-Reich's claim to eternity. We were confronted with a curious constellation of seemingly harmless music, a cheerful beer tent environment, and the harshest possible political speeches that caused a deep sense of unease. Only a thick description like the one above is able to render the specifics of this interplay between material arrangements, music, human, and non-human actors in a given situation comprehensively. This is how the FPÖ erects a populist space in which ideas of home become tangible.

Case study 2: Coming home to "Fürstenfeld"

Our second case study discusses S.T.S.'s "Fürstenfeld," one of the songs that was performed at the FPÖ event. For this purpose, we deploy a multi-sited approach to seek other situations in which two of the central actors in the episode described above – the song and the festive rural setting – both feature. We encountered "Fürstenfeld" again on a sunny afternoon at Aufsteirern, a late-summer street festival for "Styrian folk culture" in the Styrian capital of Graz. Here, we observed a group of about eight young people in their early twenties, all dressed in pseudo-traditional costumes for the occasion, like almost every one of the 130,000 visitors present in September 2019. The group was participating in a silent disco event in which the music they all hear is delivered via headphones, as opposed to loudspeakers. Here, everyone appeared familiar with the song being played, S.T.S.'s "Fürstenfeld" – remarkable not least because it was released in 1984, years before the participants were even born. The group was dancing and singing along loudly, at times in a circle reminiscent of a group hug.

As with "I Am from Austria," knowledge of this song or the band S.T.S. is culturally specific: S.T.S.'s status within Austria is that of an established band whose popularity transcends generations. The relationship of Germans who have come to live and work in Austria to the band's music, however, is different: whilst some have never heard of the band, others are at least familiar with "Fürstenfeld" as a quintessentially Austrian song, because it is usually played at après-ski events in the Austrian mountains.

In our group analysis of the studio version of "Fürstenfeld" (conducted with the same group as "I Am from Austria"), we discussed how the instrumentation is layered in such a way as to create a sequential movement, which mirrors the narrative contained within the lyrics: the singer, after several frustrating experiences of busking in the streets of Vienna, longs to return to his hometown of

Fürstenfeld, declaring in a broad Austrian dialect that he does not need the "big world" ("Brauch ka große Wöd"). After the intro come the guitar and bass drum, typical of solo entertainers and street music – at this point, the protagonist sounded "far away" and "lonely" to participants in our group analysis. Then comes the bass, accenting the quarter notes in a polka bass style, which is common in Austrian folk music and schlager; later still, the tuba and the accordion are introduced, which our group heard as signifiers of Austrian music from rural areas, or of beer tent music. The music thus takes us on a return trip 'home' – and as soon as the tuba and accordion come in, we are finally about to reach our destination. In the third verse, lead singer Schiffkowitz namechecks several towns and villages, each of them significantly smaller than Vienna, and progressively smaller as he proceeds. This in turn conveys a powerful statement: whilst the music becomes fuller and more joyful, the protagonist's surroundings are shrinking, and his delight is apparent in the music. During our fieldwork at Aufsteirern, not only did we witness people singing the lyrics to "Fürstenfeld" – thereby embodying the multipart voices of the song and performing togetherness through bodily engagement – but some were also singing the tuba part, which makes its first appearance at around 4:30 of the studio version. Following the insights of our MGA, one can say that those singing along with the song were performing the home precisely afforded by the music. "Fürstenfeld" carefully presents its interior progression as a longing to get back home, and this is realised musically at the end, once the song's energy has reached its zenith.

Yet, apart from reading the song as a celebration of the rural, our MGA also pointed to other ways of making sense of "Fürstenfeld." Both the video and the music allow for an interpretation of the song as an ironic critique of such rural romanticism, since they depict the protagonist as a self-pitying busker from the provinces who fails to succeed in the capital. The sense of humour is most apparent in the music video (S.T.S 2015), where the protagonist is presented in an ironic and self-deprecating way as a yokel whose misadventures result in homesickness.

Our MGA also identified irony in the music. One such example can be found in the formal complexity of the song, which has an almost programmatic quality: "Fürstenfeld" consists of two very distinct parts. First, the unusually long intro (one minute and twenty-seven seconds) is sung a cappella by the three singers in a homophonic texture that recalls church or rural (folk) choirs, containing four verses of eight bars each. Then comes the second part, the actual song with full pop/folk instrumentation. The choir from the first part introduces the protagonist of the second part in the third person, creating a meta-perspective reminiscent of dramatic theatre in which the protagonist is observed by the spectators; this therefore necessitates an introduction of a certain length and a cappella delivery, so as to set the scene without the distraction of other instruments. But by the time the choir returns in the choruses of the second part, the narrative mode has changed to the first person; with the full band accompaniment, the choir now

invites the listener to sing along: "I wanna get back home" ("I wü wida hoam"). The listener, therefore, actively joins in with the narration which is now one of shared experience, in the sense that 'we' are all familiar with this situation. Whilst, in the narration, the protagonist is still struggling to break into the Viennese music scene, the music itself increasingly creates a rural space of belonging for everyone. The song has thus corrupted the listeners, turning them from mere spectators of someone else's homesickness during the introduction into a group who ends up co-performing the musical wish to get back home, which was understood in our MGA to be a satirical nod on the part of S.T.S to the country bumpkin hidden in each of us.

Theoretically, both of the above readings are afforded by the music. How is it, then, that irony is not the reception mode of choice that we encountered in our fieldwork, be it at Aufsteirern or the FPÖ's Blauer Montag? Here, assembly (see Butler 2016, 29), sound, and material space are mutually dependent. To return to Aufsteirern, the Dirndl and leather trousers, the large quantities of alcohol, the choice of music and its mode of intimate yet shared consumption via headphones in public, the joint bodily performance and the resulting closeness, the bystanders who suddenly become part of the scene – all this contributed to contextualising the music performed in a specific way, irrespective of the intentions of its makers. The young people singing and dancing that we observed at Aufsteirern, for example, make it possible to interpret the protagonist's sarcastic scorning of the city as an unironic and authentic celebration of the rural, particularly given that the festival takes place in Graz's central square, which during Aufsteirern becomes the "largest village square of the state" ("der größte Dorfplatz des Landes," Aufsteirern Festival 2022), as the festival advertises on its website. In this sense, "Fürstenfeld" is about the Austrian "heartland" (Taggart 2000) and its uncorrupted, honest way of life. It has become a song that touches on the distinction between urban (bad) and rural (good) spaces, an issue that is continuously exploited in Austrian far-right populist politics – and celebrated in broad daylight without any complaint.

Discussion

The specific shaping of a cultural and topographical Austrian identity, and its articulation as part of an invented Austrian tradition (as Wallnöfer (2020) points out in her research on the Tracht) are important cues for understanding the performative styles that pertain in Austrian far-right populism, as exemplified by the FPÖ's use of music in given situations. During most of our fieldwork, the popular music that we encountered was enjoyable and devoid of direct populist messages, capable of appealing to and entertaining a broad demographic. Of all possible cultural activities, therefore, why has the FPÖ chosen music and very specific settings to transmit its agenda? What are the advantages of this choice for far-right populist politics?

Beyond political music

In our fieldwork at FPÖ events and beyond, we encountered stylistic hybrids of folksy schlager, rock, and country, which afford strong references to a specific form of Austrian identity. This is primarily associated with rural Alpine spaces directly opposed to urban environments, and a cultural space linked to tradition that observes deep-seated gender segregation and looks critically at the new and the foreign. This imagination of Austria presents the country as a rural, culturally homogeneous place of nativist longing, implying that "states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group [. . .] and that nonnative elements [. . .] are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde 2007, 19). There is also a strong relationship here between nationalism (based on membership and ideas of shared territory) and the bottom-up directionality of populist politics (see Moffit 2020, 35). This latter connection can also be witnessed in the speeches and activities of FPÖ politicians (see our thick description of Blauer Montag, for instance).

The two songs in our case study were written and recorded by musicians who have often publicly dismissed right-wing populist politics, and as we have shown, both songs can be interpreted as making a case *against* an easy glorification of the Austrian nation or country life, respectively. We have argued, however, that both "Fürstenfeld" and "I Am from Austria" afford populist far-right politics given the right setting. Therefore, our understanding of political music needs to be expanded: whilst Rösing (2004) uses this term to refer to music created with a clear political motivation, our fieldwork shows that music may in fact be susceptible to politicisation through specific socio-material spaces, practices, and surroundings (see also Doehring and Ginkel 2022). The FPÖ's use of specific music commonly understood to be apolitical nevertheless activates and assembles in a political sense and is a great opportunity to spread far-right populist topics into wider society through musical aggregation in characteristic places.

Regionalist experience: Place is the space

As right-wing populist parties "use different ideologies and traditions [. . .], [to] evoke different pasts in the form of identity narratives,"[19] Ruth Wodak (2020, 30) calls for a context-sensitive approach to the field. By taking into account Austria's multiple opportunity structures that enable or restrict the use of popular music (for which a "context-sensitive approach" (Doehring 2015, 134) has also been set as a benchmark), our research has established a focus on the distinctive cultural practices of the FPÖ (music, speeches, participation) in distinctive places. As we have shown, beer tents appear to be central spaces for the musical normalisation of far-right populism in Austria. Here, specific kinds of music, customs, bodily practices, and material arrangements combine to render such spaces characteristically Austrian. We are, therefore, interested in the beer tent as a space of possibility, in which the music played can be considered a political enabler.

The FPÖ commonly uses music in an assemblage that creates an open framework in which certain rules prevail, and inhibitions are allowed to drop. Ostiguy's (2017) "flaunting of the low" – the populist parading of nativism and disinhibition – appears here to be an appropriate, though not fully sufficient, concept. Whilst the customs of the beer tent surely do not represent a flaunting of the high, such spaces are nevertheless distinctly open ones, with mixed audiences from different social backgrounds that are brought together materially and that can bond over beer and participation in the ubiquitous musical offering. In these spaces, with the appropriate musical preparation and a sense of the event's dramaturgy, it is possible to make radical right-wing statements. It is precisely this assembled surrounding that diminishes the potential controversy of such statements, making them – in the sense of normalisation co-created through music – unsuspicious and normal. It is therefore no coincidence that, as we saw, the FPÖ's slogan in 2021 was "Österreich normal." The FPÖ's use of popular music operates as a continuous reassurance that the party's concerns are in no way outlandish or extreme, but that it is instead only interested in preserving what is dear to a constructed 'us,' a self-contained and self-proclaimed group of Austrian natives.

The music in question does not appear to explicitly foster the same "politics of exclusion" (Wodak 2020, 30) that the FPÖ is known for. Instead, many songs at FPÖ rallies are bodily activating and have an integrating effect for many visitors, especially when the music is performed by a live band, such as the FPÖ's longstanding and experienced John Otti Band. Bands such as these are capable of interacting with the audience in many ways, for example by inviting them to sing along, clap their hands, and dance, or else by chatting with and toasting the audience between (and even during) songs. They actively aggregate their listeners, a process that Born (2021, 189) calls "audiencing." Regionalist notions, such as we saw in "Fürstenfeld," are more than enough for the FPÖ to make effective use of the music. For the duration of the song, 'we' become part of a larger group assembled in the space. 'We' are thus interpellated through this assemblage as 'the people' that party representatives refer to in their speeches. Even in our roles as researchers in the field, we were touched by this sensual assemblage attempting to inhabit our bodies; we moved to the music, and some of the songs encountered in the field stayed with us until the writing of this article. This is because we were part of a social closure that was established by the music. A musical space was created that had the potential to exclude anyone who did not feel comfortable or welcome there. Though the music may allow such gatherings to appear amicable and pleasant, what is really enabled by this process is a politics of exclusion.

Mainstream and mainstreaming

In Austria, it makes sense to speak of several different musical mainstreams, divided by genre. For example, there is a radio mainstream that specialises in Austrian

popular music on the public stations Ö3 and FM4; these, however, do not play the music that we encountered during our fieldwork. The FPÖ's musical selections focuses on another mainstream that is, unlike the Anglophone pop mainstream, sung in an unmistakably Austrian accent: the Alpine culture of folksy schlager, which, despite being popular, is precarious in terms of sales figures and economic growth prospects, and thus functions primarily in a live performance context, or in social isolation on Austrian TV where it is very popular. This is not a far-right or populist culture per se. In the right socio-material setting, however, this particular mainstream proves highly compatible with the party's agenda. Given the genre's penchant for imagined Alpine spaces with their respective music culture and customs that are presented as natural, uncorrupted places of longing ('home'), the FPÖ can easily articulate important strands of Austrian populism such as an Austrian reconstructive nationalism (Botsch 2020) or nativism. In this sense, therefore, the music appears to appeal indiscriminately to an experience of what is normal and desirable. This is made possible through the transformation of public spaces for FPÖ events as a programmatic part of FPÖ politics: campaign events are held in the market squares of cities such as Vienna and Graz, and set up to recall beer tent events and folk festivals such as Aufsteirern or Wachauer Volksfest, where the Blauer Montag took place. Here, it is easy for the FPÖ to be mainstream and perform as representatives of 'the people.' This allows the party to be both innocuous and politically specific simultaneously.

On one hand, our fieldwork seems to confirm the ideational approach in studies of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), which regards populism as dependent in terms of content and other ideologies. The nationalism and nativism (see Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 34, 38) that we see in the political speeches of the FPÖ and the waving of flags whilst politicians parade around beer tents clearly adhere to this formula. However, the use of music on site points to another dimension that is essential for the connection between far-right populism and the mainstream in Austria. A discursive-performative research approach (see Moffit 2020) can trace how performative practices are precisely those that establish political meaning and, in the same breath, normalise far-right populist positions and their performative styles. De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017, 301) suggest that "the co-occurrence of populism and nationalism," which they understand as distinct phenomena, "should be studied through the prism of articulation." In our case, such an articulation is established through the assembled conjunction of popular music, political speeches, material arrangements, and practices of participation. Normalisation in this sense is multidirectional and operates as a re-articulation of common cultural tropes such as a longing for a nationalised 'home' in populist or extremist terms. In the socio-musical practices of the FPÖ we find a blurring of the boundaries between the fringes and the mainstream. This constitutes a recontextualisation of mainstream popular culture.

In our research, we encountered a selective image of what is considered Austrian: predominantly Alpine and rural spaces with their customs, costumes, and

music, against which city life is rejected (see Wallnöfer 2019, 65–66). Here, ideas of what it means to be Austrian are formed and represented in performance; the nation and its native people emerge from this system of cultural representations (Hall 1994, 415).

As our group analyses showed, both "I Am from Austria" and "Fürstenfeld" could be understood differently, that is, as ironic about or ambivalent towards rural life and the Austrian nation. In the songs alone, there is no open embrace of populism. In our multi-sited fieldwork, however, be it at FPÖ rallies or folk festivals, we found a conjoining stream of significant actors (music, Trachten, alcohol, the mode of the beer tent, and so on) that is characteristic of an Austrian culture of populism as a performative style, in which a specific mode of preferred readings occurs. In this assemblage, a song like "I Am from Austria" can be taken to glorify the Austrian homeland, regardless of the country's history and the insufficient ways in which it has been processed (as exemplified by the Waldheim affair that inspired the song). "Fürstenfeld," meanwhile, can be heard as devoid of irony, so that it actually expresses a longing for the rural. This musical home created by the FPÖ, by means of spaces of affordance at its rallies, thus serves to enable and normalise far-right populist politics in Austria.

Notes

1. In 2019, the poem "Die Stadtratte" ("The City Rat"), in which migrants are compared with rats, was distributed by the FPÖ in Upper Austria's Braunau am Inn, which is, by the way, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler (Bathke 2019).
2. "dass sie in der politischen Praxis keine klare Trennlinie zieht. Über 70 Jahre nach Ende des Nationalsozialismus und über 60 Jahre nach Gründung der Partei wirkt die Vergangenheit immer noch nach, von der man sich - so scheint es - nicht lösen kann und will." (Our translation.)
3. For a critical perspective, see Eckelsberger 2021.
4. For example, see Kleine Zeitung 2018.
5. Our research is not concerned with the question of who makes this selection, as our focus is not the agency of any individual mastermind behind certain musical practices. What we are interested in is the effect the music has in its corresponding setting.
6. Nevertheless, as German-born researchers critical of far-right politics, we did not feel at ease on these occasions, since we do not identify as part of 'the people,' the FPÖ's intended audience.
7. Jörg Haider spoke of "decent people who have remained true to their convictions," "explicitly referring to former Austrian members of the Waffen-SS" (our translation) (see Wodak and Forchtner 2014, 66).
8. "Seine von ihm verdrängte und verschwiegene Rolle im Zweiten Weltkrieg wurde das tragische Lebensthema des verstorbenen Altbundespräsidenten Kurt Waldheim."
9. "Kurt Waldheim war kein Kriegsverbrecher gewesen, aber er hatte sich in räumlicher und zeitlicher Nähe von Nazi-Gräueltaten befunden; er war zu unbedeutend gewesen, um Befehle zu geben oder Massaker verhindern zu können. Aber er musste gesehen haben, was im gnadenlosen Krieg am Balkan rund um ihn vorging."
10. "Das Lied entstand 1988/'89, nach der Waldheim-Affäre, an die sich viele gar nicht erinnern können, die heute Fahnen schwingen und "I Am From Austria" singen. [. . .] Man konnte [Waldheim] eine Nazi-Vergangenheit nachweisen, zumindest, dass er bei

der SA war. Und er ist sehr ungeschickt mit dieser Geschichte umgegangen. Die Folge war: Österreich stand international als Nazi-Land da. Und viele Österreicher haben sich geschämt und ihre eigene Identität geleugnet. [. . .] Ich fand das furchtbar, und deshalb habe ich ein Lied geschrieben. Das Lied wurde aber als nationalistisch kritisiert und zunächst im Radio kaum gespielt. Dabei war es nie nationalistisch gemeint. Es hat mir einfach wehgetan, dass man Österreich verleugnet [. . .]. Und weil Österreich in der ganzen Welt schlecht darstellt [sic] wurde, habe ich die Refrainzeile bewusst englisch gesungen: 'I am from Austria.'"

11 A contemporary news item from the Austrian Press Agency reports (our translation): "The songs 'Kurti' and 'Man muß wissen, wann man geh'n muß,' which 'Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung' sang on their Austrian tour, are reported to have a judicial aftermath: The band was accused of 'disparagement of the Federal President.'"

"Ein gerichtliches Nachspiel sollen für die ‚Erste Allgemeine Verunsicherung' die Lieder ‚Kurti' und ‚Man muß wissen, wann man geh'n muß' haben, die sie auf ihrer Österreichtournee singen: Sie wurden wegen ‚Verunglimpfung des Bundespräsidenten' angezeigt" (Nichtso Wichtig 2013).

12 In the wake of these events, *Der Standard* discussed whether Fendrich may be able to sue the organisers of the demonstrations for their use of his song (Jung 2021).

13 "I Am from Austria" was produced by Tato Gomez, who is known for other German-language hit songs of the time, such as "Verliebte Jungs" by Purple Schulz or Fendrich's "Macho Macho." He later went on to produce the backing tracks for Germany's *Pop Idol* equivalent, *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*.

14 "Wär ich nur ein- oder zwei- oder dreitausend Jahre am Leben."

15 "Wo sind die Freunde der FPÖ?"

16 The march, which was composed in 1955 but only published in 1985 and has since become widely popular, is controversial for the addition of four verses not written by its original composer, all of which are full of unambiguously combative rhetoric and territorial claims relating to South Tyrol as part of a Pan-German Reich ("deutsches Unterland"). It is remarkable that the FPÖ began to use marching music with such an overt extreme-right subtext for the activation of their audience at a time when Jörg Haider, having taken over the party's leadership, started to develop the mode of the beer tent as a political strategy.

17 "Gleich ist es so weit!"

18 A songbook produced by the fraternity *Germania zu Wiener Neustadt* contained antisemitic lyrics. This became public during the 2018 state election campaign in Lower Austria. Subsequently, fraternity member Udo Landbauer resigned from all political functions – for a mere six months.

19 "unterschiedliche Ideologien und Traditionen nutzen [. . .], verschiedene Vergangenheiten in Form von Identitätsnarrativen heraufbeschwören."

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4

POPULISM IN THE LAND OF POP

The Sweden Democrats, popular music, and the performance of heroic averageness

Melanie Schiller

Sweden was long considered an exception in Europe in that no populist radical right (PRR) party (Mudde 2007) had managed to succeed amongst Swedish voters (Rydgren 2002). That changed with the Sweden Democrats' (SD) rapid ascent from a niche phenomenon to one of the country's biggest parties.[1] In the 2022 parliamentary elections, the SD became the second-strongest party, gaining significant influence over the conservative-right minority government led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson (Moderates). The SD's rise cannot be fully understood without acknowledging that their PRR project is profoundly cultural. Focusing on how the SD's discourses are articulated in popular music specifically, this chapter understands the party as striving for not only political power but, more importantly, cultural hegemony.

After the 2014 European Parliament election, the Sweden Democrats' chief ideologist Mattias Karlsson described the current 'culture war' as follows: "Today's main conflict is [. . .] between conservative patriots and cosmopolitan cultural radicals. The big and decisive battle regarding the survival of our civilizations, our cultures and our nations has reached a new, more intensive and decisive phase" (quoted in Tamas 2021).[2] Four years later, after the 2018 parliamentary elections, he further clarified his views: "Our opponents have truly forced us into an existential struggle for the survival of our culture and our nation. There are only two choices, victory or death" (Tamas 2021). For Karlsson, *culture* is central in this perceived war because it "affects everything. It affects how we think, how we feel, how the economy works, how we behave towards each other, how safe we can be, what our identity is and what we are loyal to" (Sveriges Television AB 2020b). In fact, he deems culture even more important than politics; it "influences politics more than the other way around" (Sveriges Television AB 2020b). Karlsson therefore pitches a "conservative cultural revolution" to undo the post-1969 culture of

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questioning identities, which was allegedly brought about by "politically correct cultural Marxist elites," and reinstate an essentialist understanding of Swedish culture and identity (Sveriges Television AB 2020b).

In addition to elite postmodern theories and deconstructive ideologies, the SD espies other threats to Swedish national identity in non-native influences, immigration, and specifically Islam. In a recent TV debate, party secretary Richard Jomshof claimed that Islam is "an abominable ideology and religion" (Sveriges Television AB 2021). This reinforced earlier Islamophobic utterances by other party members, who directly connected rapes committed in Sweden with immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. "We currently see the result of decades of mass-immigration, multiculturalism, and Islamisation," Jomshof concluded, leading to "our society being torn apart [. . .] divided, segregated, cold, and violent" (Sveriges Television AB 2021).[3] Due to the deconstructive establishment and immigration, Swedish culture is considered to be in decline, with the SD positioning themselves as the saviours of Swedish identity and culture. Consequently, the party is heavily invested in cultural policies, questions of a national canon, and cultural production. They have their own rock band, Bedårande Barn (Adorable Children), featuring Jimmie Åkesson, who is widely considered the party's charismatic leader.

In this chapter, I trace how the SD's PRR discourses are mainstreamed and normalised by focusing on how they enact a populist style (Moffitt 2016) in popular music. I describe what I call the party's performance of "heroic averageness." By adopting an actor-centred approach and focusing on the party's 'house band' as a paradigmatic case, I show how the SD employs two connected hegemonic strategies: First, they mainstream their discourses in the realm of what Chantal Mouffe terms "politics" (institutionalised politics) by drawing on the aesthetics and means of popular culture and music (Mouffe 2005). Presenting themselves as ostensibly mainstream and popular, in a colourful and accessible musical aesthetic, the SD 'popify' their PRR discourses. Second and even more importantly, they radicalise what is widely accepted as 'normal' and 'common sense' (the cultural mainstream, i.e. hegemony) by introducing antagonism and re-articulating popular (national) culture and music in PRR terms. In so doing, they inscribe popular culture with new meanings in the realm of what Mouffe labels as "the political": the site of struggle in which groups with contesting interests compete for hegemony (Mouffe 2005).

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Sweden between 2019 and 2022 (in particular, participatory observation at the SD's annual summer festival in 2019, numerous informal conversations with party supporters, and the 2022 election campaign); archival research; and a media discourse analysis of the party's changing self-representation in its publications (such as the party magazine, *SD Kuriren, Samtiden.nu,* and *RIKS TV* on YouTube) and mainstream media. I also introduce a multiple opportunity structure analysis, which examines the political, cultural, discursive, and musical opportunities for (and constraints on) attempts to mainstream and normalise the PRR in Sweden. To grasp the musical material and its

affordances, I have collaboratively conducted musicological group analyses (MGAs) in Sweden with music experts.[4] As is explained in more detail in the introduction to this volume, this analytical method uses collective and self-reflective listening and analysis sessions to prompt reflection on the connection between musical sounds and structures (as well as audiovisual materials) and a song's range of possible social meanings (Doehring and Ginkel 2022). For each song discussed in this chapter, my team organised a session with three to five participants with backgrounds in the Swedish music industry, music policy, music journalism, but also (ethno)musicology and popular music studies (myself included). The groups discussed both the music and sometimes related audiovisual material. These sessions took place in Stockholm in 2020 and lasted about three hours for each song. Here, I focus on the three paradigmatic, especially influential songs by the SD's 'house band' Bedårande Barn. Written from an outsider's perspective (I am not native to Sweden), my analysis may have limitations. Nonetheless, as cultural ethnologist Åke Daun points out in his study of Swedishness, it can equally be argued that students of "their own" culture can be blind to the taken-for-granted (1993, 17). Unsocialised in the system of meaning under discussion but familiar enough with it (Czarniawska 1998), I hope to contribute to the cultural study of Sweden's PRR.

The SD's radical right populism and heroic averageness

This chapter employs a discursive-performative approach to understanding the PRR in contemporary Sweden, for which populism is "an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'" (Panizza 2005, 3). This approach entails "focusing on political performance and action *in the first place*, and how that expresses political ideas and subjectivities" (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 390, emphasis in original): using key concepts including performance, performativity, actors, audiences, stages, scripts, and the mise-en-scène to understand populist articulations in specific contexts. Popular culture is a key realm in which 'the people' is constituted, which is why celebrity culture and populist performance styles often interact. As I show, the SD's contemporary populism exemplifies this interaction, with the party's undisputed leader Jimmie Åkesson performing as a (wannabe) rockstar in Bedårande Barn at concerts and party events. Finally, although Cas Mudde conceptualises populism in ideational terms, his analyses of the PRR party family also apply to the SD's politics, which encompass nationalism,[5] authoritarianism,[6] and populism. In line with Mudde, the SD can be described as PRR, with nationalism rather than populism being the predominant feature of their discourse (Mudde 2007, 26).

The most prevalent manifestation of contemporary radical right populism in Sweden, the SD have hegemonic ambitions. Their populism is triadic: from an imagined centrality, it looks *up* against the elite, which they accuse of betraying Swedish identity, culture, and 'normal' people, and *down* upon non-native immigrants, thought to pose the second threat to Swedish culture, particularly through Islamisation (Judis

2016, 15). In view of this perceived double threat, the SD champion the culture of supposed 'normal' Swedes: 'the people' or silent majority, presented as embodying common sense and being antagonistically opposed to both the establishment and scapegoated immigrants and non-native others. Yet rather than "flaunting the low," relying on coarse, misbehaved, and vulgar performances (Ostiguy 2017), the SD heroically flaunt their averageness as noble defenders of (exclusive and hegemonic) Swedish 'normality.' By performing a heroic averageness, the SD's populism purports to challenge the "left-liberal establishment" (J. Åkesson 2018, 9), aiming to precipitate a sociocultural revolution (Ostiguy 2017) and preserve 'traditional' Swedishness.

As I illustrate in this chapter, this performance of heroic averageness emphasises aesthetic and ideological commonness (the SD highlighting their own 'normality' as 'average Swedes' and downplaying politically radical discourse). This common demeanour is combined with the trope of heroism; performing averageness becomes a noble defence of Swedish 'normality' against the internal threat posed by the elite and external 'other' undermining Swedish ordinariness and identity.[7] The SD draw on popular tastes and aesthetic values associated with cultural expressions of low cultural status, which they endorse as being the true values and representations of 'the people' (conceptualized as 'spectacular commonness' by Torgeir Naerland (2016)).' However, in performing heroic averageness, the SD also politicise the performance of commonness, which they elevate into a heroic defence of national culture and revolt against the left-liberal establishment's ostensible cultural hegemony. On one side, the SD claim to represent Swedish normality and averageness, positioning themselves as the voice of common sense and ordinary people. On another hand, they articulate this hegemonic commonness through rebellious and heroic counter-hegemonic claims against the establishment. In brief, heroic averageness is the paradoxical articulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses in populist performances.

Multiple opportunity structure analysis

Political opportunity structure

Sweden is internationally known for, and prides itself on, its strong social democratic tradition, which has been fundamental to discourses of Swedishness since before the Second World War. Social democratic politician Per Albin Hansson introduced the notion of the *folkhem* (people's home) in a seminal speech of 1928, in which he described the social democratic ideal of the nation as "the good home" and national community as a family:

> The basis of the home is community and togetherness. The good home knows no privileged or disadvantaged, no favourites and no stepchildren. There no one looks down on the other. There no one tries to gain an advantage at the

> expense of others, the strong do not oppress and plunder the weak. In the good home equality/similarity/sameness [*likhet*], caring, cooperation, and helpfulness prevail.
>
> *(Hansson 1928)*

At a time of extreme class cleavages and high unemployment in largely rural Sweden, following a period of starvation and mass emigration, Hansson's utopian vision struck a chord. In 1932, the Social Democrats won the national elections, Hansson became prime minister and laid the foundation for the "Swedish Model": a rapid modernisation project that built a strong welfare state with free education, universal healthcare, and strong unions. The folkhem concept, which is sometimes associated with the idea that Sweden is a "country of consensus" (Khayati 2013, 90), has become synonymous with Sweden's idealised vision of itself. And this vision is closely connected with the long period in which the Social Democrats were almost constantly in power (1932–1976).

Although the folkhem ideal had obvious exclusionary characteristics,[8] since 1945 Sweden has received large numbers of asylum seekers, refugees, and labour migrants from many religiously, culturally, and linguistically different regions (Khayati 2013). Still, Sweden was long considered homogeneous and to have a strong political consensus, free from racism and ethnic discrimination. Consequently, it was not deemed necessary to hold a public debate on immigration policies (Khayati 2013). This consensus has been increasingly challenged since the 1980s, as the number of refugees of non-European origin grew. This new debate over national identity and immigration coincided with the 1986 assassination of Olof Palme, the social democratic prime minister, the foundation of the Sweden Democrats in 1988, and several widely mediated xenophobic attacks by the so-called "Laser Man" (*lasermannen*) in 1991 and 1992.[9] This period also saw the formation of Sweden's first xenophobic liberal populist party Ny Demokrati [New Democracy, NyD] in 1991. Although NyD had disappeared again from politics by 1994, they paved the way for the SD, not just in their anti-establishment, tax-liberal, and anti-immigration policies, but in their insistence that politics should be more fun and use popular music and styles.

Besides NyD's brief representation in parliament, Sweden had not seen a strong radical right movement, unlike many European countries and its neighbours (Herkman 2017; Rydgren 2002; 2006). In recent years, however, the SD have increasingly taken advantage of opportunities for PRR politics: The decline of class politics in Sweden (leading to waning party loyalties); growing salience of sociocultural politics (such as the politicisation of immigration); and increasing convergence of the mainstream left (e.g. Social Democrats) and right (e.g. Moderaterna), leaving voters confused about political alternatives (Jylhä, Rydgren, and Strimling 2019). Following the 2008 Great Recession and so-called European refugee crisis in 2015, trust in political institutions, established parties, and the media decreased significantly, particularly amongst "economic losers" (Bó et al. 2018). Voter abstention

rose, especially amongst the working classes. Mistrust towards financial and political elites increased, as did apprehension towards immigrants (in line with their growing visibility), anti-EU sentiments, and authoritarian attitudes (Dehdari 2022; Rydgren 2002; Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019; Schroeder 2020). Although the SD only attained 1.44% of votes in 2002, they entered parliament with 5.7% in 2010, growing to 17.5% by 2018. They became the second biggest parliamentary faction in 2022, with 20.54% of the vote. Consequently, the SD have been gaining ground even amongst traditional bastions of social democracy such as the labour unions (Nilsson and TT 2021). Finally, especially since Jimmie Åkesson became party leader in 2005, the Sweden Democrats have successfully distanced themselves from their neo-Nazi roots in openly racist organisations while not fundamentally altering their ideology and agenda (cf. Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019).

Although established parties distanced themselves from the SD until around 2010, the party's growing popularity increasingly challenged this *cordon sanitaire* (Oja and Mral 2013). Other political parties gradually reconciled with the idea of collaborating with the SD and the Swedish media gave increasing exposure, thereby helping normalise PRR discourses (de Jonge 2021; Ekström, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2020; Oja and Mral 2013). The formation of the more radical and overtly racist Alternative for Sweden (Alternativ för Sverige, AfS) by expelled SD members in 2018 presented the SD with an opportunity to represent themselves as a moderate-right alternative. Compared with the AfS's explicitly racist agenda, the SD could position itself as another centrist party on the mainstream conservative right. Moreover, changes in the media landscape over the last decade (i.e. the declining influence of 'mainstream' media outlets, diversification of digital media, and establishment of alternative media) have allowed the PRR to challenge government and mainstream discourses continuously (Schroeder 2020). Specifically, the SD launched the online newspaper *Samtiden.nu* and YouTube channel *RIKS*, and have been exceptionally active and successful on social media (Baas 2021; Sandberg and Ihlebæk 2019).

Cultural and discursive opportunity structure

The SD's PRR discourse is closely bound up with general notions of Swedish national identity, culture, and tradition, especially the folkhem ideal. On the discursive and cultural level, the SD both face obstacles and enjoy opportunities: Many Swedes pride themselves on not being patriotic (Henriksson 2006) and Swedish national identity is strongly connected to anti-nationalism and antiracism (Hübinette 2013). That said, 85% of Swedes say they are proud to be Swedish (PRC 2018); many of them consider Sweden "the most modern country in the world" (J. Andersson 2009). As Swedish ethnologist Karl-Olov Arnstberg argues, "we [Swedes] love the image of ourselves as best in the world, but the concept of nationalism is taboo" (quoted in Johansson Heinö 2009, 306). In Sweden, nationalism has

been largely unacceptable except in the guise of what Michael Billig (1995) terms "banal nationalism" (the everyday, ubiquitous flagging of the nation or "covert nationalism" (Åke Daun quoted in Hultén 2007, 31). "Racists," writes Johansson Heinö, "are not [considered] real Swedes" (2009, 307). Nevertheless, Swedishness is heavily invested in a hegemonic Whiteness. Constantly reinscribed as the normative yet unmarked position, this Whiteness effectively forecloses, silences, and excludes non-White Swedes' experiences of everyday racism (Hübinette 2014; Hübinette and Lundström 2014; Teitelbaum 2017b).

In normalising its PRR discourses, the SD navigated a series of cultural-discursive opportunities and constraints that are brought into focus by two key concepts: the so-called "Jante Law" and Swedish idiom *lagom*. The Swedish Jante Law (*Jantelagen*) or "law of mediocracy" is not a body of law, but rather a ubiquitous unwritten convention, code of conduct, or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, 81). Derived from the "commandments" observed in the fictional town Jante described in Aksel Sandemose's novel *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* (1933), the law holds that one should not consider themselves better than anyone else, discouraging individual superiority and ambition. It can be said to celebrate everyman and egalitarianism, establishing averageness as the ideal. Though it primarily refers to materialist boasting, the law also applies to intellectual ability, physical appearance, and ambition (Turausky 2011). Nonconformist behaviour, showing off, and personal ambition are frowned upon and silently sanctioned with social exclusion. So 'natural' is the Jante Law to Swedish culture that it has become an unspoken yet undisputed understanding (Henningsen 2001, 182).[10] The Jante Law's origin connects to the egalitarian folkhem. Yet whereas the latter is now merely a nostalgic ideal (Daun 2002, 215), the Jante Law still operates as a Gramscian hegemonic framework providing "cultural, moral, and ideological leadership" (Gramsci 2000, 423).

Lagom is the second important cultural concept for understanding PRR articulations in contemporary Sweden. The term, which is not easily translated into English, refers to notions of "just enough," "just right," "appropriate," "reasonable," "middle-road," or the "golden mean" (cf. T. Andersson and Radmann 1999; Ruth 1984). It signifies the idea that everything has a perfect quantity or quality; any more or less would be undesirable. The concept is considered definitive of Swedish culture – so much so that Sweden is often described as 'the little country of lagom' (*Lilla landet lagom*), the country of in-betweenness or the middle (*landet Mittemellan*) (Mahmood 2014; J. Nilsson 2015). Besides being a quantitative measure, lagom includes a qualitative and normative dimension: "We don't only have the word lagom, we are lagom" (Parkvall 2009, 9).[11] Like the Jante law, lagom rewards the average and moderate, which, again, has connections to the egalitarian folkhem: lagom meant sharing resources and individually taking responsibility in the national community of equals (Ruth 1984). Lagom inherently associates Swedishness with hegemonic Whiteness and can carry nativist connotations. Two examples: First, in 2002, Botkyrka, an immigrant-majority town outside Stockholm embraced "Far from lagom" (*Långt ifrån lagom*) as its slogan, thereby highlighting

its distance from hegemonic Swedishness (Hedstrand 2002). Second, inspired by Donald Trump's famous slogan, radical nationalists who bemoan immigration declare a desire to "Make Sweden 'lagom' again," (*Gör Sverige lagom igen*) (Sverigedemokraterna Skaraborg, 2018).

Swedish society's image of itself as anti-racist, modern, progressive, and rewarding of averageness or normality exists simultaneously with underlying notions of Swedish superiority, exceptionalism, hegemonic Whiteness, ubiquitous banal nationalism, and general nostalgia for the 'lost' folkhem (J. Andersson 2009; Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993). This double bind presents the SD with opportunities but also limitations. On the one hand, their PRR discourse of authoritarianism and nativism is generally considered radical, unmodern, and hence "un-Swedish" (*osvensk*) (Laul 2018; TT 2007). On the other, many aspects of the SD's nativism blend seamlessly with Swedes' widely held assumptions, such as the longing for the folkhem (especially its Whiteness); ideal of the heteronormative family; implied Christianity; and an often idealised image of rural life and Swedish nature (H. Andersson 2020; Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993; Werner and Björk Tomas 2014). The SD's challenge, then, has been to articulate their populist nationalism in a way that is perceived as not radical, but rather 'lagom,' 'appropriate,' 'normal,' and 'commonsensical' in a context in which nationalism and racism are disclaimed but widely performed.

In seeking to mainstream their discourses, the SD started referring to itself as the lagom party. When he appeared on the YouTube political program *Partitempen* (led by popular influencer Margaux Dietz) in 2018, the SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson was asked to bring in an object that represents his party. He brought a package of medium-fat milk (*mellanmjölk*, literally: "middle milk"), a product associated with the safe middle of the road (perhaps not coincidentally white) and with national identity (Sweden has been called "the land of the middle milk" (Mahmood 2014, 57)). Åkesson explains that "many objects could represent the party. But this is *mellanmjölk* [middle milk]. So it's like 'lagom is best.'" He continues thus: "It's a bit Swedish. It's a bit lagom. It's a little bit Jante law, but not too much. [. . .] We're also a little lagom. [. . .] A few years ago we were seen as a very extreme party in Sweden. When we actually advocate a politics that is quite normal in the rest of Europe. There's this paraphrase of Trump's 'Make America great again': Make Sweden lagom again. That's what I think" (Dietz 2018).[12]

In normalising radical right discourses, the SD perform a heroic averageness that connects with the ideal of lagom, the Jante law, and hegemonic national imaginations. In numerous speeches and publications, such as Åkesson's book *The Modern Folkhem. A Sweden-friendly Version* (*Det moderna Folkhemmet. En Sverigevänlig vision*, 2018), the SD cast themselves as the only legitimate heirs to the lost ideal of the nation as the Swedish people's 'good home,' which was betrayed by 'the elite.' Shared national nostalgia for the folkhem, articulated in a 'lagom' manner and tied to 'common sense' banal nationalism, enables the SD to present themselves as

normal, merely expressing commonly held beliefs. This performance of averageness is combined with the heroic necessity to defend Swedish identity and culture against internal (the establishment) and external (immigration) threats. This populist performance of heroic averageness is reflected in the party's overall aesthetics and musical output.

Musical opportunity structure

Music plays a central role in Swedish national identity and therefore the mainstreaming and normalisation of PRR discourses. It draws on Swedish pride in the country's folk and ballad traditions, which still inspire artists across genres (I. Åkesson 2006; Lundberg and Ternhag 2005; Mokoena 2015). Swedish international successes in choral singing and pop music have been respectively dubbed the "Swedish Choral Miracle," (Massengale 2019; Reimers 1993) and "Swedish Pop Miracle" (Sveriges Television AB 2019; Fleischer 2017; Hallencreutz, Lundequist, and Malmberg 2004; Johansson 2020).

With bands such as ABBA, Europe, and Roxette reaching charts globally from the 1970s onwards, Swedish music culture has produced role models for international success and become increasingly professionalized (Hallencreutz, Lundequist, and Malmberg 2004). Since the 1990s especially, the Swedish government has taken notice of the economically powerful popular music sector, including its potential for national branding and fostering national pride (Johansson 2010). The year 1993 saw the foundation of Music Export Sweden, a subsidised organisation tasked with resourcing and internationally promoting Swedish music. The annual "Government's Music Export Prize" has been awarded since 1997 (Regeringskansliet 2017) and numerous music funding schemes are available. Sweden, which was especially prolific in producing internationally successful music until the 1990s, is considered the world's third-largest exporter of popular music (Braunerhjelm 2009; Fleischer 2017; Forss 1999; Johansson 2010).

This narrative was consolidated by what Ola Johansson has called "The Swedish Music Miracle 2.0" (Johansson 2020, 4). Alongside Swedish bands' continuing international success, this "miracle" involves pop writer-producers. For almost two decades, Swedish songwriters and producers such as Avicii, Denniz Pop, Max Martin, Shellback, and RedOne have produced global hit songs by pop artists such as Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys, Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Adele, Timbaland, The Weeknd, and Coldplay. On several occasions during the 2010s, half the songs in the US Top 10 list were written by Swedes: a quarter of the number one hits on the Billboard charts in 2014 were (co-)written by Swedes, as were a quarter of 2016 *Eurovision Song Contest* (*ESC*) entries (Gradvall and Akinmade Åkerström 2017; Johansson 2020). The latter, combined with the fact that only Ireland has the same amount of Eurovision wins as Sweden, has led some to speak of the contest's "Swedenisation" (Cords, tw, and rf 2016; Statista 2024).

This narrative of Swedish pop success, despite not going entirely uncontested (Fleischer 2017), has been widely disseminated and remediated in Sweden, whether through regular newspaper and magazine articles, television documentaries, institutions such as the Swedish Music Hall of Fame and the *Melodifestivalens Hall of Fame* (Sveriges Television AB 2020a),[13] or the Swedish government's invocation of the "Swedish Music Miracle" to promote Sweden internationally (Sweden.se 2021). Multiple reasons are adduced to explain Sweden's musical success. They include the presence of role models of such success; the notion that Swedes adopt new international trends, styles, technologies, and business models early; Swedes' proficiency in English; Sweden's strong governmental/institutional support and subsidised music education system; and the increasing professionalisation of Stockholm's music industry cluster from the 1990s (Fleischer 2017; Hallencreutz, Lundequist, and Malmberg 2004; Johansson 2010; 2020).

Given that the SD aim to foster a sense of national community, tradition, and belonging, music is important for their performance of Swedishness (Sverigedemokraterna 2020). Combining PRR discourses with banal nationalism, they hold up the "Swedish Music Miracle" as an instance of Swedish cultural supremacy and reason for national pride. The party organ *SD Kuriren*, for instance, equates the "Music Miracle" with other monuments of Swedish history and identity under the recurrent rubric of "Swedish treasures" (Emilsson 2014). Especially prominent are the house music superstar Avicii and indie rock band Mando Diao, who released a successful Swedish language album (Mando Diao 2012) based on poems by Gustaf Fröding (1860–1911). To honour Avicii after his untimely death, the SD even suggested erecting a fountain statue of the DJ in one of Stockholm's central squares (SD Stockholms Stad 2021; Makander 2021).

Though the SD celebrate the success of Swedish pop music, they also criticise what they consider non-native influences on Swedish music. This connects with national and Sweden Democratic discourses of Swedish cultural supremacy and normativity. For instance, in a recent tweet the SD MP Björn Söder complained about a bus driver playing supposedly un-Swedish Arabic music: "Should there not be a requirement for some sort of 'neutral' music in public buses? #IslamisationofSweden" (Söder 2021a). He later expanded on what he meant by "neutral": "music that the current majority understands what they are singing about" (Söder 2021b). Music performance, heritage, and consumption have thus become discursive battlefields in the struggle for hegemonic Swedishness. Music is tied to notions of averageness and the majority, but also constructed against external threats – in this case, Islam. Indeed, by alluding to the great replacement conspiracy theory, Söder implies that the "current" Swedish majority may not be in the majority much longer. Similarly, a member of the SD youth wing has even drawn parallels between Swedish gangster rap and "entartete Kunst" (degenerate art) (Rydell 2021). In line with the party's authoritarianism, she has called for the genre to be banned on public media.[14]

Although Sweden's musical tastes, subcultures, and styles are highly diverse, it has been repeatedly described as a "pop country" (Johansson 2020, 3): Pop "is a style long favored by the public, from the radio show *Svensktoppen* [. . .] to the prominence of the Eurovision" (Johansson 2020, 3). Musical Swedishness is often connected to the *ESC* and *Melodifestivalen* style. As Johansson argues, Eurovision – or the *Schlager festival*, as it is also called – is arguably more popular in Sweden than elsewhere, with up to 85% of television viewers tuning in (Björnberg and Bossius 2017; Eurovisionworld 2016; Johansson 2020, 115).

These associations amongst a Swedish sound, Schlager pop, and the *ESC* came to the fore in the MGAs my collaborators and I conducted in Sweden. Consider a remark made by Bert Karlsson, a founding member of NyD and famous record company manager who is known as a "hit maker." He emphasises that although the "average" Swede has diverse musical tastes, they generally "likes real melodies [and] everything from *Schlager* to melodic hard rock" (Van Luik 2011, 104) – precisely those genres most associated with the SD's music.

> What [average Swedes] like is an average of not only Sweden's, but global music tastes. What characterises that taste is that you don't like the extreme [. . .]. Abba was of course the ultimate group, Björn and Benny managed to combine pop, Schlager, and dance-band [music] in one. [. . .] Abba managed to capture everything.
>
> *(Van Luik 2011, 105)*

In music as with lagom and middle-milk, then, Swedishness is associated with an accessible and middle-of-the-road sound. These elements come together in the distinctly Swedish phenomenon of *allsång* (literally all-song or community singing) (Björnberg and Bossius 2017). Introduced to Sweden in the 1920s to forge (national) solidarity through collective singing, allsång has been a cornerstone of Swedish musical culture (though its popularity has fluctuated). Exemplified by popular television shows such as *Allsång på Skansen* (SVT) and *Lotta på Liseberg* (TV4), allsång is perceived as characteristically Swedish, as numerous *Allsång på Skansen* fans explained to me during interviews conducted in 2020. The repertoires of popular allsång events are, again, marked by stylistic hybridity and a balance of tradition and renewal. Emphasising accessibility, simplicity, and participation, they combine older and recent Schlager hits with folk songs, traditional ballads, rock'n'roll, but also contemporary hip hop and even heavy metal (though not extreme forms). Extending beyond TV shows, allsång is associated with popularity (*folklighet*), middle-of-the-road, and mainstream tastes.

Though the SD may disapprove of the diversity and inclusiveness of shows such as *Allsång på Skansen*, they embrace their community-building function and celebration of musical heritage. In *SD Kuriren*, the SD present a self-test that readers can use to check their level of social traditionalism. One question asks readers to choose between "Allsång på Skansen" or "a six-hour Wagner opera," the former

being the desired answer (Hedarv 2015, 13). Although the SD has criticised Swedish public service stations' allegedly left-liberal agenda, Jimmie Åkesson has recently embraced public service productions such as *Melodifestivalen* and *Allsång på Skansen* (Scherman 2021).

The Sweden Democrats and music

Many SD MPs and the party leadership have a musical background or are active musicians. SD politicians sing and produce many party campaign songs. Former executive board member Paula Bieler sang "Tillsammans!" (Together, 2014), for example, while chief of staff Linus Bylund sung "Vi är på gång nu!" (We've got something going now, 2010) and "Blåsippans väg" (Blue anemone's way, 2006), which was produced by Tomas Ringdahl. Bylund and Ringdahl also run their own nationalist Viking rock project, Korpöga (Raven Eye) (Lindström 2014). Other musically active MPs in the party's leadership include Alexander Christiansson, the son of the founder of Jerusalem, a well-known Christian hard rock band. In fact, Christiansson managed Jerusalem for fifteen years and sometimes contributed to its backing vocals (Petersson 2018). Christiansson plays folk-like music and produced the song and video "Vi är SD" (We are SD, 2018), which is regularly performed at party events. Michael Rubbestad is the psy-trance DJ Aladdin; he and Christiansson form De Konservativa Kamraterna (The Conservative Comrades), a music project that released an EDM version of the Swedish national anthem (2019). Richard Jomshof used to be in the well-known synth-pop band Elegant Machinery. Finally, party leader Jimmie Åkesson plays keyboard in a band that has become closely associated with the party, which I focus on here: Bedårande Barn.

Like most other SD musical projects, Bedårande Barn has not enjoyed mainstream success nor is it well known in Sweden. On Spotify, the band has 4,300 monthly listeners and its two most popular songs have more than 685,000 streams each. It has 2,100 channel subscribers on YouTube, where its most popular songs have been viewed between 100,000 and 200,000 times. The band has managed to gain a cult status within SD circles, though, for it expresses the party's politics through aesthetic and affective means. In a 2020 poll initiated by the SD's annual Summer Festival Facebook page, followers were invited to share what they wanted to see at that year's festival: Bedårande Barn topped the poll, outranking even "beer and cheaper food." Formed in 2015 by singer Marcus Öhrn and party leader Jimmie Åkesson, the band currently includes Jesper Landin on guitar and Peter London on bass. Öhrn has accrued some fame for participating in the music talent TV show *Fame Factory* (produced by NyD's Bert Karlsson) and as a "reality TV star" (Eriksson 2018). He has been part of different bands, such as the well-known pop-punk group Noice (2004–2008) and popular comedy dance band Rolandz. All of Bedårande Barn's other members are active in bands of varying fame, including the sleaze rock band Crashdïet (Peter London).

Bedårande Barn's music is best described as pop rock with punk and hard rock influences, nationalist lyrics, and underdog narratives. Song titles include "Ung rebell" (Young rebel, 2017), "Mitt Land" (My land, 2015), and "Försvara och bevara" (Defend and preserve, 2016). The band primarily covers songs by disparate artists, including pop stars Eva Dahlgren and Lena Philipsson, singer-songwriter Björn Afzelius, Noice, and Christian Schlager singer Simon Ådahl, as I discuss below. But they particularly focus on covering songs by the influential Swedish nationalist Viking rock band Ultima Thule, with which Bedårande Barn have collaborated and performed on numerous occasions, including at the SD 2019 summer festival (which I attended for this research). Ultima Thule played a key role in mainstreaming Swedish nationalism, especially in the 1990s, when the band was signed with Karlsson's Mariann Records, helping them achieve several top ten hits and get albums into the national charts. Ultima Thule still participate in the nationalist scene, in which they are widely seen as inspirational (Bradling 2021; Teitelbaum 2017a). Leading SD politicians, including Bylund and Åkesson, have explicitly named Ultima Thule as having directly incited them to become nationalists (Eriksson 2014; Liljestrand 2018).

Bedårande Barn have recorded several albums and released numerous singles, EPs, promos, demos, live recordings, remixes, music videos, and live DVDs. A vast selection of merchandise is sold online and at party events or concerts. The band is active on Facebook and fans can acquire costly VIP tickets for concerts (which include meet and greets or dinners), as well as gain access to exclusive release parties, and CD signings. The band's music often has a DIY character and is self-released with Asp & Lycke, the publishing company of Åkesson and his ex-partner, SD politician Louise Erixon. Although the band produces most of their own songs, many are done in collaboration with Ultima Thule members (particularly Jan Törnblom) or recorded with established Schlager producers or artists such as Peter Jezewski, as in the case of Bedårande Barn's soundtrack to the SD's 2018 national election campaign "Varje liten del" (Every little part, 2018), analysed below.

Although Bedårande Barn are known primarily in the SD's social community, the band and discourse surrounding it stages Åkesson as charismatic, cool, authentic, and different from conventional politicians. His role as party leader is emphasised, but not overtly (chiming with Sweden's typically non-hierarchical leadership styles and the Jante Law (Holmberg and Åkerblom 2008)). Jimmie, as his fans call him familiarly, is the band's core attraction. This is obvious in social media comments and personal conversations with audience members at the 2019 SD Summer festival, where the band headlined alongside Ultima Thule. In conversations around the concert, audience members did not initially seem like 'typical' hard rock/punk and nationalist music fans. Rather, they were predominantly middle-aged, middle-class parents. Many told me that they were looking forward to the concert because of Jimmie and primary appreciated the band's message. In a conversation my colleagues and I had with Åkesson during a public autograph session,

he confirmed that the SD's politics and his band's music are tightly interwoven. Accordingly, I now analyse three specific songs as case studies for understanding the SD's populist style and heroic averageness as performed through music, as well as how Bedårande Barn exemplifies the party's double logic of mainstreaming PRR discourses while simultaneously aiming to radicalise notions of normality and common sense in Swedish society by rearticulating those discourses in populist and nationalist terms.

Lighting a candle for Sweden: "Tänker be för Sverige"

"Jag tänker be för Sverige" (I will pray for Sweden, 2015) is amongst Bedårande Barn's most popular songs (confirmed by a poll on their Facebook profile and more than 680,000 streams on Spotify as of June 2024). The song, which has also gained mainstream media attention, is a cover of a song written by the well-known Schlager and Christian pop artist Simon Ådahl. Having successfully participated several times in the 1990s, Ådahl is known for his involvement in the *Melodifestivalen*, but also as a solo artist. In late 2015, Åkesson linked to Ådahl's original song (2006) on his Facebook page alongside a relatively long text bemoaning the arguably devastated state of the nation, rise of crime in Sweden, worsening climate of debate, and increasing social polarisation (J. Åkesson 2015a). A few weeks later, Åkesson posted again, announcing that he and his band had covered Ådahl's song, which he stated "catches a lot of what we are experiencing right now" (J. Åkesson 2015b).

Ådahl's original starts with the rumbling of a thunderstorm and rain, accompanied by a mellow piano melody that soon builds into a more dramatic, thicker layer of synthesised strings, a flute-like synthesised melody, snare drums marking a marching rhythm – all produced with a thick reverb. The first verse, sung in Swedish in a raspy yet not aggressive voice, introduces the narrative of a lonely homeless man sleeping under a bridge, a woman in dirty shoes collecting cans and trash, "this being Sweden today." Meanwhile, men in "the corridors of power" carry parachutes to protect themselves while hurting others. The lyrics address the listener directly, emphasising the national crisis: "Do you not see the violence on the streets and squares? Have a look at Malmö, Stockholm and Gothenburg! [. . .] does it never end?" In the chorus the narrator emphatically announces that he intends to pray for Sweden and invites the listener to join him: "I light a candle for Sweden, light with me. Something has happened to my dear fatherland [*fosterland*], I am going to pray for Sweden, pray with me!" Two more verses bemoan the general passivity of churches and their long-forgotten social role, "because Christianity is just a beautiful ideal." Verse five exclaims that if one still believes, the time has come to speak up and pray: "we pray for fire that becomes a blaze over all of Sweden!" The vocals become more intense during the song's second half, shifting from lamentation towards distress. The song ends by repeating the chorus twice, inviting the listener to join the community ("pray with us!") and light a candle for "our dear fatherland."

In the MGA, the song was initially described in terms of the generic sentimental Euro-Schlager typical of the *Melodifestivalen* or *ESC*.[15] Listeners thought it enrols musical and lyrical ballad clichés (such as light as an open metaphor). As one participant highlighted, it uses (synthetised) strings, delay, and reverb to create a sense of grandeur and stir affects. The production was deemed "pathetic," "cheesy," "kitschy," "dreamy," "bombastic," and "ostentatious." Relying on familiarity in sound and delivery and offering no surprises, it was seen as fostering community and inviting communal singing-along ("allsång"). Given these goals, the song is musically accessible, harmonically appealing, memorable, and mainstream in its sound, production, and aesthetic. That said, the group thought that the harsh social realism and specificity of the lyrical narrative jarred with the music, which might easily belong to a melancholic Schlager love song. The narrator plays a truth teller, albeit one whose observations are somewhat naïve and simplifying. He is the one who knows, understands, and speaks up, while others remain silent, passive, or ignorant. This implies a certain nostalgia, suggesting that Sweden used to be better ("something has happened") in that solidarity and morality prevailed (the lost folkhem ideal). National grievances are exclusively ascribed to the nation's cities, Malmö, Stockholm, and Gothenburg, presented as alienated, secular, and riddled with crime and violence. Furthermore, the song creates notions of musical rootedness and rural community. Its prominent flute-like melody sonically evokes an undefined folkiness and the lyrics emphasise how urbanism has put ideals of traditionalism and conservatism under pressure.

Bedårande Barn's cover of "Jag tänker be för Sverige" remains close to the original. Notably, the opening thunder effects are omitted and an electric piano melody (played amateurishly by Åkesson) is more pronounced in the beginning and emphasised with additional modulations at the end. While the overall production is more stripped than the original, creating a sense of directness, it still makes ample use of reverb and delay, opening up a large sonic space and evoking grandeur. In the original, the first chorus comes only after four full verses, whereas in Bedårande Barn's single it arrives after just two. This makes the song even more accessible and radio-friendly. Two verses addressing the Church, Christianity, and collective praying are left out, though the original structure remains in the extended version. In the MGAs, Marcus Öhrn's singing was described as boyish (childlike), breathy, and infused with vibrato, which participants perceived as typically Swedish in this genre. Visually, the cover of Bedårande Barn's single simulates an oil painting depicting a partially burnt-down candle in the national colours (yellow and blue), symbolising the national decline.

Simon Ådahl was initially unaware of Åkesson's cover. Approached for comment by the press, he explained that he had neither been contacted nor given permission. An immigrant from Finland, Ådahl expressed deep concern and disapproval of the SD's politics, explaining that the song was written as a form of Christian prayer and should not be politically appropriated. To him, the SD represent the antithesis of what his song meant to express: "It's a prayer for the return of empathy

and compassion. Sweden is getting colder and colder" (Brundell 2015). Criticising Åkesson's actions and the SD's xenophobia, Ådahl donated all royalties of the song to an institution supporting refugees (Karlsten 2015).

When Åkesson first linked to the original song on Facebook, he highlighted that he is not traditionally religious like Ådahl, but strongly identified with the lyrics, which "go straight to the heart like a bullet" (J. Åkesson 2015a). To Åkesson, the lyrics felt more topical than ever, though he saw praying as insufficient for facing Sweden's "misery" (J. Åkesson 2015a). For him, the lyrics evoke a feeling that many can identify with: "we are many who rightly feel a strong sense of concern. And sorrow." While the original may be intended as a song of prayer, its narrative, aesthetic, and capacity to mobilise allow for populist appropriation. Lyrically, the song constructs a community coded as Swedish, Christian, heteronormative, and traditional, built on 'family values.' It also evokes national nostalgia and mounts criticisms of self-serving "men in the corridors of power." The SD's populist rhetoric emphasises all these elements, albeit with connotations that differ in slight but crucial ways. In the original song, the 'other' is those in need of systemic support, who suffer from the increasing lack of compassion in an individualised society. Indeed, the song criticises the political system and the Church for foregoing their charitable responsibilities. In Bedårande Barn's version, the initial lyrics are repeated verbatim, but they take on very different meanings in a different political context. Sweden the Christian fatherland becomes an exclusive community based on religious affiliation, its 'other' being Islam. The elite has precipitated the nation's demise and loss of identity. The cover was released amid a series of arson attacks on asylum homes. Against that backdrop, the MGA group saw the song's invitation to "light a fire that becomes a blaze" as not a heroic, rebellious act, but a threat with xenophobic resonances (cf. Sjöberg 2016).

If the lyrics accrue different meanings, the music largely mimics the original, though it further emphasises accessibility, familiarity, identification, and participation. Whereas Ådahl's song is clearly geared towards a mainstream audience in form and style, Bedårande Barn's version turns a culturally popular sonic aesthetic into an expression of anti-elitism. It embraces popular tastes by virtue of its inherent simplicity and standardisation. Instead of lamenting secularisation and indifference (not least toward refugees), the populist cover bemoans Sweden's loss of identity, demands action against those threatening the Christian national community, and dramatises the national crisis through a politics of affect and mobilisation. Covering a song as such "Tänker be för Sverige" thus offers the SD an opportunity to both connect with uncontroversial discourses that Ådahl expressed in a mainstream aesthetic and recontextualise, rearticulate, and inscribe them with new significance without having to take responsibility for the message. Attributing new meanings to popular culture, the SD radicalise the mainstream. In musical performances of heroic averageness, the SD simultaneously draw on hegemonic culture and claim to defend it from threatening others – both the elite and immigrants.

Here I want to live, here I want to die: "Fädernesland"

Another influential song performed by Bedårande Barn is "Fädernesland" (Fatherland, 2015), a cover of one of Ultima Thule's nationalist anthems. Originally released on Ultima Thule's album *För Fäderneslandet* (For the fatherland, 1992), the song is amongst the band's most distinctive songs and a strong source of identification for nationalists. So popular is the song that the CD released in honour of Bedårande Barn's *5 Year Anniversary* (2020) consists exclusively of six versions of the song (there is an orchestral and instrumental rendition, plus a demo and two live versions). In August 2015, the song briefly topped the Swedish iTunes charts (Bedårande Barn 2015; Lindström 2015). The song is the clear highlight of both Ultima Thule's and Bedårande Barn's live concerts, with entire audiences singing along fervently. At a 2022 SD election event,[16] Bedårande Barn's cover version was used as the 'ringwalk' anthem marking Jimmie Åkesson's arrival. When a major tabloid newspaper asked all Swedish party leaders to pick "an artwork that summarises Sweden for them," Åkesson chose "Fädernesland" (Liljestrand 2018). He was the only leader opting for popular music. Asked to explain his choice, he replies: "You could say it's a song that I picked up quite early on, that has shaped much of my view of the nation; made me think about how we who live today are part of what has been, and also part of what is to come. I think it's very beautiful and straightforward" (Liljestrand 2018).

Åkesson's choice of a pop song to represent Sweden is remarkable in itself, for it enables him to position himself as 'one of the people,' as opposed to the other party leaders, all of whom picked 'elite' objects. More provocative still, though, is that he chose a song from a notorious White radical nationalist Viking rock band. In this way, he recontextualised Ultima Thule's radical nationalist message in mainstream culture. This makes Ultima Thule visible and gives them credibility, but also appeals to radical rightwingers: In choosing "Fädernesland," Åkesson authenticates himself as a heroic rebel who cleaves to his roots and convictions in fighting for Sweden's survival. Both by selecting the song as symbolic of Sweden and playing it with his band, Åkesson performs heroic averageness.

Bedårande Barn's "Fädernesland" begins with a simple melodic intro played on the piano, signifying intimacy and sincerity. An accompaniment of electric guitar, drums, and bass, which slowly build in intensity, recall middle-of-the-road sentimental arena rock. The instrumentation is sparse, though the production aims to create a 'big,' orotund sound and evokes an open landscape. Power chords create a sense of rigour and grandiosity, dominance and power. The song's harmonic structure is simple, adhering to standard pop/rock traditions (some MGA participants deemed it cliché).[17] Lacking complexities, surprises, and tensions, this is a safe and predictable musical discourse. Technically, the song flaunts its own amateurism. As one participant noted, it can be interpreted as anti-intellectual: Far from being geared towards sophisticated listeners expecting to be challenged or surprised, the song's structural and instrumental simplicity, lack of subtlety, and embrace of

unprofessionalism emphasise authenticity and directness. The song is made to be easily consumable, instantly recognisable and memorable, and seem familiar to a mainstream audience.

The lyrics comprise three verses, sung with pathos and heavy with meaning. The first evokes the first-person narrator's past, rootedness, and upbringing: "Here I was lifted up, on my father's arm. Here I was cradled safe in my mother's arms. Here I wore my first shoes. Here I have my sister and my brother." MGA participants noted that the lyrics are written in an antiquated style reminiscent of national romantic writers such as Verner von Heidenstam and refer to tropes from popular Schlager from the 1920s to the 1950s. The song's most memorable melodic hook and central lyrical element were made for a sing-along (allsång): "Here I want to live, here I want to die. Here I live in freedom" is repeated twice, accompanied by male backing vocals that suggest a collective experience and community. The chorus is an immediately recognisable intertextual reference to the Swedish national anthem (the lyrics are almost identical). It also recalls popular folk songs such as Jussi Björling's "Ack Värmeland du sköna" (Oh Värmeland, 1822) and Ulf Lundell's sentimental pop ballad and 'unofficial national anthem' "Öppna Landskap" (Open Landscapes, 1982). The song therefore alludes to not just nineteenth-century romanticism but well-known folk, Schlager, and pop songs too.

The song's symbolic lyrics connect the natural circle of life to love of the nation. Idealised nature is a recognised trope for Swedishness: the open landscape evoked by the song's lyrics and sound symbolises freedom, pristine rurality, and a national romanticism. These entail a chain of associations involving rootedness, home, belonging, tradition, family, ancestors, generations, nostalgia, and security, with the reproduction of these ideals being cast as a noble responsibility to the future. "Fädernesland" establishes a sense of community, providing an anthem for listeners to connect and identify with on the basis of shared roots, ancestry, values, and patriotism. Musically, this community is presented as powerful, masculine, exclusive, growing, and preparing for action. The MGA participants perceived the song's melodic repetitions, especially of the lines "here I want to live, here I want to die, here I live in freedom," as almost authoritarian or evangelical. One participant described the song as "functional" and even "propaganda rock'n'roll," for it is clearly intended to address mainstream audiences while simultaneously transposing a nationalist message and inviting affective identification with the nationalist movement.

Compared to Ultima Thule's version, Bedårande Barn present a much more mainstream and professional-sounding narrative of national pride, while retaining the original's structure and lyrics. Whereas Bedårande Barn's version was clearly produced in a studio, the original is more acoustic; a harmonica plays the opening melody and musical interludes, evoking liveness, rootedness, authenticity. That said, its sound is enhanced to create a sense of heroism, the epic, and a wide musical landscape. Ultima Thule emphasise their discourse's masculinity by using a prominent male backing choir in lower register, making the original more threatening

than Bedårande Barn's accessible and 'slick' cover. The CD cover image of Ultima Thule's version – a painting depicting a Viking battleship leading a fleet in stormy weather – also underscores the song's militant character. Bedårande Barn's cover is less belligerent. A stylised pastiche of Joe Rothenthal's iconic "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima,"[18] it shows lumberjacks 'heroically' raising the Swedish flag. Though it alludes to militarism by association, this cover prioritises recognisability and mobilises a common imaginary.

The official music video accompanying Bedårande Barn's single highlights aspects of the musical-lyrical discourse while downplaying others. The video is shot as if it were a classic live concert video, showcasing the band's stage performance before SD fans at a party festival held in a rural barn. The video both has a professional look and embraces a DIY aesthetic, evoking rock authenticity through shaky, blurry images. Instead of highlighting the song's pugnacious implications, it emphasises normalcy and averageness: The members of the audience accentuated through close-ups are primarily young, White, and apparently middle-class women and men enjoying themselves and cheering to the camera. The obvious highlighting of female audience members softens the song's masculinist discourse. The singer's performance is passionate; at times it is as if he is preaching to his following, encouraging the audience to participate (allsång). But Åkesson, who is frequently in picture playing the keyboard, is the real star of the show. The video's ending is especially telling in this regard. As the audience call for an encore, we see Åkesson smiling, looking into the camera in a charming and coy way. Although he enjoys his popularity, he seems almost uncomfortable with the celebration of his persona. Shot from below to create a sense of authority, Åkesson is thereby presented as both special and normal, approachable, and average. His normalcy is underlined by his neat, sartorial appearance: Whereas the other band members are dressed as rockers, he wears a suit, white shirt, and glasses. Moreover, he has a 'decent' haircut, indicating middle-class ordinariness and harmlessness. One might call him the 'perfect son-in-law.'

Overall, Bedårande Barn (and by extension, the SD) mainstream Ultima Thule's radical nationalism, by claiming that the taboo band's song represents Sweden in a major newspaper; professionalizing, polishing, and softening the original; and enrolling pop aesthetics and affective strategies. Without changing the song's content, the cover both signals authenticity to the party's radical right following and repackages a radical nationalist message as a popular song for mainstream audiences. Bedårande Barn perform heroic averageness, then, in that they integrate hegemonic musical aesthetics with counter-hegemonic nationalist discourses.

With every little part of me for Sweden: "Varje liten del"

My final case study, "Varje liten del" (Every little part, 2018) shows how the SD's two strategies – radicalising the mainstream and mainstreaming the radical by performing heroic averageness – converge in the party's official song for the 2018 national parliamentary elections.

Released on May 2, 2018, the song was first presented as "an exclusive world premiere" on the Facebook profile of the well-known political expert and moderator Marcus Oscarsson from the TV4 television station. Citing Åkesson, the journalist introduces it as a "catchy pop Schlager that sticks right away" (Schulman 2018), awarding the song five out of five microphones (used as a symbol to rate songs, as stars often are) and remarking that the popular artist Benjamin Ingrosso should be thankful that "Varje liten del" is not competing in the *Melodifestivalen* (which he was tipped to win). Although most of the band's songs are covers, "Varje liten del" is self-composed and written, in collaboration with Peter Jezewski, a well-known mainstream pop artist. Jezewski sings with Marcus Öhrn on the single, which was released with Åkesson's label. Åkesson claims to have written the lyrics; established Schlager producer Lasse Andersson produced the song; and the SD's party secretary Richard Jomshof mixed and mastered it.[19]

"Varje liten del" can best be described as a catchy up-tempo pop song in the style of Eurovision or, more specifically, Swedish Schlager pop associated with the *Melodifestivalen*. According to the MGA participants,[20] the song explicitly alludes to well-known Swedish (summer) pop hits and Schlager songs. To them, "Varje liten del" was instantaneously recognisable and extremely familiar. The group went so far as to call the song a collage of *Melodifestivalen* Schlager songs or compilation of Sweden's greatest summer hits. Although the song is clearly geared towards mainstream tastes, the group also recognised hard rock influences, especially in the song's performative grandiosity. Like my earlier case studies, "Varje liten del" is also produced to sound 'big,' evoking images of heroic postures struck on mountaintops that appeared in melodic hard rock and glam metal music videos in the 1980s and 1990s. The song's sonic production style was perceived as somewhat retro (and nostalgic), recalling those same decades. That said, it includes modern elements too, combining Schlager pop, hard rock, dance music (*dansband*), and electropop. The mixture alludes to what Bert Karlsson has described as popular Swedish tastes, blending and averaging out diverse genres and styles. This clearly positions the song as popular (*folklig*), accessible, recognisable, and uncomplicated. With its catchy chorus hook (mainly comprising the memorable "lalalalala"), "Varje liten del" is an anti-intellectual feel-good pop song that invites a sing-along (allsång).

Regarding style and production, the song establishes a sense of (national) community through what the MGA participants recognised as a typically Swedish pop sound on account of its structural simplicity, generic hybridity, and childlike, memorable melody (Johansson 2020). Like all *Melodifestivalen* music, "Varje liten del" is composed to appeal to the greatest possible audience: the "middle milk" mainstream. Emphasising collectivity and uniformity rather than individuality, the song reassembles pop hits and musical commonplaces. It presents itself as not originally authentic, but a convergence of the popular. Musically, this is expressed by a lack of solo passages using individual instruments, there being no outstanding features or performances, and the vocals being mixed so as to almost blend in with the

instruments. Only after several listens did the MGA group detect that there are in fact *two* singers taking turns.

Whereas the music underscores its own averageness and conformity in a way that is normative and, as some MGA participants highlighted, even tendentially authoritarian (tolerating no divergence in arrangement and structure), the lyrics suggest that the community it constructs has a heroic character: "A nation that rises again, a people, women, children, men. And many thought everything was over, they thought it was over a long time ago." The first verse unambiguously introduces the song's radical reconstructive nationalism (Botsch 2020), conjuring a national resurgence. The song almost immediately builds up to the first double chorus, which interpellates listeners (positioning them to identify with its discourse), urging them to join the tenacious national movement: "Every little part of me. For Sweden's best together with you, no one can stop us now, go on, and never stop." Casting the national community as eternal, yet requiring protection and defence (as in the other two case studies), the second verse continues asserting that "our home will become again what we dreamed" through collective effort "an integral [*hel*] nation, that is our vision." The bridge carries the song's central message: "Now we are standing here together, a 'folkhem' that disappeared. Now everything will be built up again, up again, build everything again." This is sung with a rising tone and intensity. After an interlude of more earwormy "lalalala," the song ends by repeating the double chorus.

Although the music is clearly mainstream in its sound, ambition, and call on listeners to participate in it (emphasised by the fact that the single contains a karaoke version), the lyrics are more radical in tone. In their allusion to a Swedish identity under threat and appeal to a fierce nationalist uprising, they practice the populist politics of fear (Wodak 2021), combined with cultural and musical nostalgia. The CD cover underlines this PRR message visually, depicting the band's name, song title, and the SD's symbolic flower (the blue anemone in Sweden's national colours) in stylised cross-stitch embroidery. Similarly, the music video showcases the lyrics in simulated cross-stitching embroidery, again evoking a sense of traditionalism, nostalgia, and domesticity – though here in association with femininity, in contrast with the other two case studies' masculinist discourse.

"Varje liten del" combines the populist style of mainstreaming the radical (as in the popification of Ultima Thule's radical nationalism in "Fädernesland") and radicalising the mainstream (as in Ådahl's populist rearticulation of popular Christian Schlager). Simultaneously as it draws on familiar Swedish popular Schlager tastes and style, the *Melodifestivalen*'s musical aesthetic and allsång participatory element, the song articulates these recognisably mainstream qualities with a radical nationalist, populist message. Performing musical Swedishness and reassembling popular hits, "Varje liten del" articulates affects of recognition, identification, belonging, and nostalgia with optimism, and a happy-go-lucky musical gesture. Despite reading as a middle-of-the-road pop song, it connects with the SD's populist discourses of heroic national resurgence. As such, "Varje liten del" performs

heroic averageness, simultaneously radicalising the mainstream (by endowing a hegemonic pop aesthetic with radical meanings) and mainstreaming the radical (articulating a counter-hegemonic message through the medium of pop).

Conclusion

The SD's campaign leading up to Sweden's 2022 general elections was presented as a travelling folk festival (*Folkfest*). The posters promised "politics, music, seriousness, and pleasure." The self-proclaimed Dance Band King (Dansbandskungen), who has millions of streams on Spotify, entertained audiences with sing-a-long Schlager and summer hits. In line with the music I have discussed, the SD performed heroic averageness throughout the campaign, mainstreaming the radical and radicalising the mainstream. Drawing on popular tastes and aesthetics, popifying radical nationalism, appealing to 'average' Swedish tastes and experiences, and demonstrating their 'normality,' the SD presented themselves as a party for the people in town squares across the country. This normalisation also entails the mainstream being radicalised: using popular hits and drawing on notions of musical Swedishness, the party aims to forge a national "community of feeling" (Berezin 2002) and bring people to identify with their representation of national culture as needing heroic defence against internal and external threats. Nationalism, authoritarianism and populism may have become ever-more salient in contemporary Sweden, then, but not only in political discourse (what Mouffe terms "politics"). They also increasingly pervade societal discourses and popular national identity (Mouffe's "the political"). By gaining influence in party politics and participating in government, the SD aim to limit so-called mass immigration, undo multiculturalism, and repair the perceived loss of national identity. But their ultimate objective, which becomes apparent when analysing their musical articulations, is broader and much more profound.

In 2018, the SD's 'chief ideologist' Mattias Karlsson judged the condition of contemporary Sweden "really bad," necessitating an "existential fight for our culture and the survival of our nation" (Renman and Elfström 2018). He saw two options: "Victory or death" (Renman and Elfström 2018). In the Swedish radical right's populist worldview, this battle is playing out primarily in the cultural realm, in which "the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged," as Stuart Hall had it (Hall 1998, 453). Absurdly enough, the SD and Hall agree in their understanding of popular culture as the site at which hegemonic notions of common sense and ideology are worked out. As SD MP Björn Söder recently summarized on twitter: "The culture war has begun. And now conservatism will win. The cultural politics of the decadent left will soon be a thing of the past. For too long, it has prevailed as a result of unbridled socialist influence and a neutered bourgeoisie. But now it's over" (Söder 2023).

In this 'culture war,' the SD draw heavily on popular culture and music to bring about the sociocultural revolution they pursue.

Firstly, the SD mainstream their radical political discourses, presenting themselves as normal and popular in their style and rhetoric without changing their content. Secondly, they aim to radicalise Sweden's cultural mainstream and precipitate a fundamental change in the political (understandings of Swedish society), transforming hegemonic culture in populist, nationalist ways. Their rearticulation of common tropes of Swedish culture, tastes, and normality performatively alters the meaning of everyday nationalism and widespread conceptions of Swedishness by wedding them to an essentialist and exclusive grasp of culture, presented as threatened. This brand of populism corresponds to Moffitt's understanding of it as "a performative political style [. . .] where the leader is seen as the performer, 'the people' as the audience, and crisis and media as the stage on which populism plays out upon" (2016, 4).

By performing heroic averageness and thereby constituting a normative articulation of 'the Swedish people,' the SD aim to radicalise the mainstream. This heroic averageness, encapsulated by Bedårande Barn, draws on popular tastes, aesthetics, and affects to represent themselves as 'normal' while simultaneously politicising popular cultural expressions and identifications as essentially Swedish. In the SD's antagonistic worldview, characterised by existential threat and the urgent need to "struggle for the survival of our culture and our nation," as Karlsson had it (quoted in Tamas 2021), the performance of 'Swedish averageness' is cast as counter-hegemonic heroism in defence of Swedish national and cultural identity. On one level, this entails naturalising 'traditional' notions of hegemonic Swedishness (i.e. Whiteness and Christianity, a focus on consensus, and a strong identification with nature and rurality). On another, these notions are deemed endangered by both so-called post-modern left-liberal elites, who query, destabilise, and undermine Swedish identity and culture, and immigrants, taken to weaken national cohesion and identification. Focusing on three specific musical case studies performed by Bedårande Barn, I have shown how the SD, in striving for cultural hegemony, aesthetically and discursively 'popify' radical nationalism and perform heroic averageness. Claiming to represent hegemonic Swedishness becomes a counter-hegemonic rebellion against elite and non-national others. Appealing to popular tastes in music, the SD interpellate Swedish audiences affectively rather than rationally. Their populism targets "both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society" (Canovan 1999, 3), and their music does what it "does as music" (Garratt 2018, 31): combine discourse and affect, establish (collective) identity, negotiate hegemony, but also make radical right populism fun to participate in.

Notes

1 I would like to thank my colleagues in the "Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe" research project; Benjamin Teitelbaum and John Street for comments on earlier versions of the ideas presented here; and the Swedish Performing Arts agency for generously hosting me as a visiting researcher in Stockholm.
2 Translations are mine throughout unless indicated otherwise.

3 After much criticism, he published a statement explaining that he meant to refer to Islamism, not Islam (Jakobson 2021).
4 Thanks to my research assistants on this project: Marina Grisko, Edvin Guevara, Fredrik Karlsson, Anna Keto, Marianne Lesigne, Alma Propst, Maria Suarez Caicedo, and Joanna Zienkiewicz.
5 Mudde refers only to nativism, but to me nationalism is broader. Although the SD's nationalism includes a degree of nativism (the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by one native group and non-native elements are fundamentally threatening), their populist performance draws on a more general sense of nationalism, including everyday culture, lifestyle, and banal nationalism (Billig 1995; Mudde 2007, 22).
6 Authoritarianism can be conceptualised as "a general disposition to glorify, to be subservient to and remain uncritical toward authoritative figures of the ingroup and to take an attitude of punishing outgroup figures in the name of some moral authority" (Adorno et al. 1969, 228), involving "the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely" (Mudde 2007, 22).
7 Here performance refers to both the performative constitution of reality and the contextual enactment and embodiment of cultural meaning.
8 As Johansson Heinö highlights, early on, Danes, Jews, Sinti, Roma, Russians, Catholics, and other 'others,' were excluded from Swedishness due to their (assumed) linguistic, religious, and cultural differences (Johansson Heinö 2009).
9 The *lasermannen* was a Swedish far-right extremist named John Ausonius, who shot eleven people in the Stockholm and Uppsala areas, the majority of whom were immigrants.
10 The Jante Law is not exclusive to Sweden; other Scandinavian countries have versions of it.
11 Various studies have debunked Sweden's self-image as lagom, including the World Values Survey, which shows that Sweden is amongst the most extreme countries in terms of values (Gourman and Swahn 2015).
12 Original: "Det finns ju många föremål som skulle kunna symbolisera partiet. Men det här är mellanmjölk. Det är alltså lagom är bäst. [. . .] Det är lite svenskt. Det är lite lagom. Lite jantelag, men inte för mycket jantelag så där. [. . .] Ja men vi är också lite lagom. [. . .] [F]ör några år sedan så betraktades vi som ett väldigt extremt parti i Sverige. När vi egentligen förespråkar en politik som är ganska normal i resten av Europa. Det finns någon sådan här omskrivning av Trumps, ´Make America great again´. Gör Sverige lagom igen. Det tycker jag."
13 *Melodifestivalen* (often shortened to Mello) is an annual televised song competition to represent Sweden in the *ESC*. Produced by the public Sveriges Television and Sveriges Radio, this widely mediated competition takes several weeks, possibly making the *Melodifestivalen* even more important in Sweden than the *ESC*. Its music is traditionally associated with Schlager, though contemporary shows present various genres, particularly focusing on pop.
14 She uses the original German phrasing, which the Nazis introduced in the 1920s to devalue art that was considered out of step with the party's ideology.
15 The session involved an ethnomusicologist specialising in Swedish Schlager music, someone from the Swedish music industry, a popular music scholar, and myself.
16 "Jimmie Åkesson och Jessica Stegruds Göta kanal turné," Karlsborg May 25, 2022.
17 This session was conducted with an ethnomusicologist and expert in Swedish folk music, someone in Swedish music policy, and a popular music scholar.
18 Rosenthal's photograph of six US Marines raising their nation's flag atop Mount Suribachi in 1945 became a symbol of the US victory in the Pacific War and supremacy in general.
19 Andersson worked with many famous Swedish Schlager artists, including Tomas Ledin, Carola, Björn Skifs, Tommy Nilsson, Pernilla Wahlgren, and Arvingarna.
20 This session was conducted with someone from Sweden's music industry, a music journalist, an ethnomusicolgist, a popular music scholar, and myself.

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5

POP STARS AS VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Xavier Naidoo, Andreas Gabalier, and the performance of populism during the Covid-19 pandemic

Mario Dunkel and Reinhard Kopanski

On September 14, 2016, Andreas Gabalier became the first Austrian musician ever to play a concert in the *MTV Unplugged* series. Gabalier's performance included his song "A Meinung haben" ("To have an opinion") (2015), which suggests that democracy in Austria has lost its meaning as freedom of speech is suppressed (Gabalier 2016).[1] Gabalier wrote the song as a response to public criticism. When the Austrian parliament officially changed the lyrics of the Austrian national anthem to honour the country's "great daughters," in addition to the "great sons" celebrated in the original version, Gabalier had refused to sing the updated version. Instead, he had performed a pop rendition of the anthem with the traditional lyrics, for which he was heavily criticised not only by politicians but also several media channels (see for example "Aufregung um Gabalier-Bundeshymne" 2014; Rottmann 2014). In a number of interviews pertaining to this debate, Gabalier adopted a right-wing populist rhetoric to argue that the Austrian parliament was ignoring the will of the people ("Gabalier vs. Rauch-Kallat" 2014). Moreover, the *MTV Unplugged* performance of "A Meinung haben" featured the celebrity R&B singer Xavier Naidoo, then one of Germany's most successful pop musicians. Their collaboration is remarkable as both musicians have been criticised by researchers and critics in Germany for reaffirming far-right populist positions (Staiger 2012; Weber 2018; Balzer 2019; Penke 2020; Sommer 2021; Dunkel, Schiller, and Schwenck 2021).

As this example shows, the close connection between far-right populism and popular music was already a matter of great public debate before the Covid-19 pandemic. Beginning in March 2020, however, the outbreak of the pandemic radically changed the German-language music market, and impacted the ways in which German popular music cultures negotiated populism. Live shows and music festivals – previously the main sites of interaction between audiences and

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musicians – suddenly vanished. At the same time, television, social media, and other forms of digital media gained greatly in significance. The pandemic thus changed the ways in which far-right populist discourses could be negotiated – normalised, mainstreamed, but also critiqued – in German popular music cultures.

This chapter investigates continuities and changes in the production and reception of far-right populist performances by investigating the practices and reception of two celebrity musicians, Xavier Naidoo and Andreas Gabalier, before and during the pandemic. Examining the performances of these two German-language musicians allows us to enquire into their different strategies for dealing with the radical changes brought about by the pandemic, and how the so-called 'Corona crisis' offered new opportunities for – as well as posing new challenges to – the normalisation of far-right populist discourses, particularly in relation to German-language popular music. Our aim is to identify the music-related mechanisms by which far-right populist discourses have been mainstreamed and normalised in contemporary German popular music cultures. We argue that the musical and media performances of these two widely-known artists exemplify changes in the opportunities for and obstacles to the mainstreaming of far-right populist discourses in Germany. We contend that the pandemic, along with the public, media, and political responses to it, contributed to substantially transforming these opportunities and obstacles.

We argue that the performance of celebrity personae contributes to the normalisation of populism, drawing on Philip Auslander's (2006) concept of musical personae as the discursive and performative construction of a musical character. There are myriad ways in which the category of 'persona' and populism interrelate. The performance of each relies on concepts such as authenticity (the persona embodies something, such as 'the people'), representation (the persona speaks on behalf of someone), and antagonism (the persona sets themselves apart from or opposes someone/something, e.g. 'the elite'). Furthermore, we argue that individual musicians can choose to have different personae, thereby potentially addressing a variety of audiences with different messages. We regard this strategy as an attempt to navigate what is perhaps the central tension in populist performance: the need to achieve popularity so as to bolster one's credibility as the voice of a numerical majority ('the people') on one hand, and to inhabit a supposedly underdog position, where popular success is impeded by a more or less clearly delineated power bloc, on the other. By analysing how the performance of personae relates to populist styles and populist mainstreaming, this chapter will demonstrate that both the interplay of different, even contradictory, celebrity personae and the strict cultivation of one persona can be mechanisms for mainstreaming populism. We will address the ways in which the use of persona(e) relates to the normalisation of populism in the case of celebrity musicians Xavier Naidoo and Andreas Gabalier. Our conclusion offers a discussion of how a focus on persona(e) can illuminate political performance in the field of popular music and populism, in Germany and beyond.

We chose to study Andreas Gabalier and Xavier Naidoo for several reasons: before the beginning of the pandemic, both were among the most successful German-language musicians and were undeniably part of the musical mainstream.[2] Though they represent different German-language genres (Naidoo is an R&B singer, whilst Gabalier bridges Schlager music, folk, and rock), Naidoo and Gabalier are widely known for being self-appointed representatives of the people in a struggle against a corrupt and oppressive elite – one of the core characteristics of populism (Moffitt 2020, 10). Moreover, even before the pandemic, both musicians stood out for songs and statements that made use of far-right populist tropes and staged strong binary antagonisms. Gabalier, for instance, has repeatedly made homophobic statements (Mach 2015), defended a patriarchal understanding of gender difference (Kreuzmann 2015), and suggested that social democratic government policies clash with the true will of the Austrian people (Tales from Austrian Jungle 2014). This is frequently combined with Gabalier presenting himself as 'one of the common people,' as in the neologism "VolksRock'n'Roller" (the title of his 2011 album).

The case of Xavier Naidoo is to some extent similar, although from the late 2000s there has been a move in his lyrics away from relative political ambivalence towards explicitly extremist far-right positions: for instance, "Raus aus dem Reichstag" ("Get out of the Reichstag") from the album *Alles kann besser werden* (*Everything can get better*) (Naidoo 2009) openly blends antisemitism, conspiracism, fantasies of violence, and populism. Meanwhile, the 2012 song "Wo sind sie jetzt?" ("Where are they now?") – a collaboration with the rapper Kool Savas on their joint album *Gespaltene Persönlichkeit* (*Split personality*) (Xavas 2012) – attests to Naidoo's embrace of conspiracy theories and entertains extremely violent fantasies against an elite that it casts as perverts, lumping together homosexuality with paedophilia, sexual violence against children, and satanism. Indeed, the song is a call to action against this alleged cabal of perverts who control the world. Although these two songs received some criticism in the left-wing and liberal media, neither caused irreparable damage to Naidoo's reputation. He was nominated by the public broadcaster Norddeutscher Rundfunk (Northern German Radio, NDR) to represent Germany in the Eurovision Song Contest of 2015, for instance, though the NDR withdrew the nomination after a backlash (Wiens 2015; NDR 2015). Despite all of this, Naidoo has been able to hold on to his role as an authority on popular music in German public discourse: in 2019, the private television channel RTL made him a jury member and mentor on the immensely popular talent show *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*, the German version of *American Idol*.[3]

The paths taken by Gabalier and Naidoo over the course of the pandemic differed significantly: Gabalier cultivated an image of himself as an inclusionary artist who embraces the aesthetics of diversity. As we will show, this is most obvious in his 2020 music video "LiebeLeben" ("Living Love"), in which he visually, textually, and musically celebrates the unifying power of love regardless of dimensions of difference such as race, body weight, ability, gender, or sexuality.

By contrast, Naidoo released a series of performances as a self-consciously political artist, including via his Telegram channel and as new song releases.[4] In these, he turned his back entirely on his status as an ostensibly non-political artist and espoused conspiracy theories, antisemitism, and far-right populism. Gabalier and Naidoo's audiences responded to these changes in a variety of ways: whereas some expressed disappointment in Gabalier, accusing him of selling out by pandering to the demands of the establishment media and music market, others celebrated his more inclusive turn. Naidoo, meanwhile, found a base amongst activists opposed to state measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as supporters of Putin (until the beginning of Putin's war against Ukraine), but lost a large section of the audience that had enjoyed his music before it became so overtly political.

This chapter's findings are based on participant observations at four concerts that we attended in 2019 (two by each artist), interviews with concertgoers, and Musicological Group Analyses (MGA), as well as social media and context analyses embedded in a multiple opportunity structure analysis. MGA is a multistage process that – drawing on the concept of affordance (DeNora 2000) – aims to map the different levels of meaning of a piece of music, as well as their entanglements with cultural and individual listening practices. The goal is to obtain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the meanings that listeners ascribe to a piece of music and its sonic structures within a particular social and cultural setting (Doehring and Ginkel 2020; see also Doehring and Ginkel 2022). Originally developed in social movement studies, the concept of a Multiple Opportunity Structure usually applies to actors' political motivations and aims. In our usage, the concept refers to actors regardless of whether or not their primary goal is to bring about political change. As such, this concept allows us to investigate the ways in which political, economic, historical, cultural, and musical structures may facilitate or hinder the normalisation of populist discourses, as appear in performances by Gabalier and Naidoo.

Multiple opportunity structure

Historical opportunity structure

Whilst we cannot provide a detailed overview of the history of populism in German-speaking countries here, it is important to note that populist rhetoric has been employed by an extremely wide array of political actors in Germany. These range from the democratic movements of the Vormärz[5] period, to communist movements, to the rise of fascism in the 1920s and the anti-nuclear power movement of the 1970s that led to the foundation of the Green Party, to name only a few. However, because the National Socialist movement from the 1920s onward – although not populist *per se* – "always bore features of protest and government populism" (D'Onofrio 2012, 257), it not only entailed a complex connection of far-right ideology and populist performance but also contributed to a widely accepted conflation

of the concept of populism with anti-pluralism (see Müller 2016a; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020), as well as a generalised scepticism of populist movements and populist rhetoric in post-war Germany. For these reasons, the re-emergence in the 2010s of a movement with populist, xenophobic, nationalist, and authoritarian features – although not the same as National Socialism – necessarily drew on the cultural memory of fascism and National Socialism in Germany.

Fuelled by political, economic, and social crises (such as the 2008 European debt crisis, the 2008 Great Recession, and the 2015 "summer of migration"), the late 2000s and 2010s saw a significant uptick in populist, xenophobic, and nationalist discourse that gave rise to a resurgence of far-right associations such as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans for the Defence of the Occident) and the foundation in 2013 of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party (Heitmeyer 2018). Initially founded as a largely libertarian protest party, the AfD radicalised in the mid-2010s when it took advantage of the so-called summer of migration to mobilise xenophobic, nationalist, and populist sentiment. In doing so, it drew on articulations of populism and nationalism that have never fully disappeared from German public discourse since the rise of National Socialism, and that are still inscribed in popular identitarian concepts such as Whiteness, heroic masculinity, Germanness, *Heimat* (Applegate 1990; Hosek 2012), and *Volk* (as in Volksmusik), as well as in tropes such as *Lügenpresse* (fake news) (Hillje 2021). The continuing popularity of such concepts was also reinforced by the discourse around German national identity after reunification (Shoshan 2016; Götz 2011). It is important to note, however, that far-right political actors have also appropriated populist frames from across a wide political spectrum and various international contexts. This includes terms such as *Altparteien* ("the establishment," literally "the old parties"), and cancel culture (Heine 2019).

Furthermore, the rise of far-right populism is also due to a broad public embrace of nationalist performances – which had been treated with great circumspection following World War II – at mass events such as the 2006 FIFA World Cup, when patriotic celebrations involving (but not limited to) the display of flags arguably became a broadly accepted cultural practice for the first time since World War II (Ismer 2016). The reprocessing (*Aufarbeitung*) of Germany's responsibility for World War II and the Holocaust has entailed the establishment of a framework for public discourse designed to prevent such destructive political movements from emerging again. Whilst this does mean that Germany's media culture is relatively sensitive to discriminatory language and actions, this sensitivity is not shared by all, and artists have repeatedly played with the boundaries of public discourse in this context. Most notably, the song "0815" by German rappers Kollegah and Farid Bang became the subject of a heated debate about the artists' insensitivity towards the Holocaust after they compared their own bodies to those of inmates in the Auschwitz concentration camp (Borcholte 2018; Kaever 2018; Baier 2019).[6] The constant renegotiation of Germany's responsibility for World War II and the Holocaust, therefore, both facilitates and hinders the spread of populism: it gave rise to a unique framework for the

setting of boundaries in public discourse, but this framework has then become a target for far-right populist accusations of censorship.

Legal framework

Germany has a particular legal framework regarding the dissemination of far-right material compared to other European countries. A number of federal laws that prohibit the dissemination of far-right propaganda, including through music, were passed in light of Germany's historical responsibility for the Holocaust. Moreover, for music that is legal but might still be harmful to young people (for example through far-right content, glorification of violence, or pornographic violence), the German state established an institution that is unique in Western democracies: the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors (Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedienschutz, BZKJ). The BZKJ has the authority to index songs and records.[7] Indexing can have a strong economic impact on the artists/labels affected (Olbrisch 2020), and is one of the most powerful tools to regulate the circulation of (mostly right-wing) extremist music (Wehrli 2015). However, standards for indexing are fairly strict (and must always consider artistic freedom), and no recordings by popular musicians such as Naidoo or Gabalier have been indexed, even though some of Naidoo's lyrics glorify violence against the elite and are irrefutably antisemitic.

One level below the state intervention of indexing are mechanisms of self-regulation. It is important to recognise that the network of public and private broadcasters (both television and radio) is relatively large in Germany. Public broadcasters are either nationwide (such as the ARD and ZDF television stations) or regional. The ARD is made up of nine subordinate broadcasters across the individual federal states (e.g. the Bayerischer Rundfunk, BR (Bavarian broadcasting)). Each of these broadcasting institutions has several radio stations and one television station. Unlike other major European public media institutions (such as RAI in Italy), ARD and ZDF are not directly controlled by the federal government, but are supervised by a variety of broadcasting councils. Public broadcasters can choose not to play music by bands and musicians suspected of having links to the extreme right, or of being excessively sexist, violent, or homophobic in their lyrics. More inconspicuous songs, however, including those by Gabalier and especially Naidoo, were ubiquitous in broadcasting before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Self-regulation can also be observed on social media: on YouTube, videos that foster hate speech (including hate music) are accompanied by a warning or blocked altogether. On Facebook, the dissemination of far-right material is no longer as easy as it used to be due to the German Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG), passed by the German parliament in 2017. The boycott and deletion of this kind of content brought about a shift towards less regulated channels such as Vimeo or Telegram. On one hand, this restricted the

mainstreaming of far-right populist positions to some extent. On the other, this shift led to the formation of new publics, many of which flew under the radar of the general public. In fact, within these new public spheres, control of far-right material remains fairly limited. In 2022, the Ministry of the Interior, then led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), however, announced its intention to develop better strategies to contain far-right extremism on these platforms (RND and dpa 2022).

Cultural and musical opportunity structures

Germany has one of the largest popular music markets in the world.[8] The 2000s saw a growing demand for and production of music with German-language lyrics across all genres. Representative studies by the Music Information Service (Musikinformationszentrum, MIZ), a branch of the German Music Council (Deutscher Musikrat), have revealed that by far the most popular genres are rock, pop and hip-hop (especially amongst younger audiences). Amongst older audiences, Schlager music is also popular, whilst interest in and demand for hip-hop is relatively low (DMR 2021). This rise in the popularity of music with German-language lyrics seems particularly relevant to the negotiation of political discourse – including the potential mainstreaming of populism and nationalism – via popular music. The fact that popular music with German lyrics has been very successful for many years allows artists such as Gabalier and Naidoo to draw on the German language as a resource. In fact, Naidoo is widely credited with helping to establish German-language R&B as a commercially successful genre in the 1990s (before then, German R&B and hip-hop artists still tended to sing in English).

In recent decades, music has often been the subject of debates about politics and ethics. In the 1990s, the German-language Deutschrock band Böhse Onkelz was perhaps the first mainstream band to be widely discussed as potentially far-right (see Schwarz 1995). Originally rooted in skinhead culture, Böhse Onkelz developed a new brand in the 1990s by framing themselves as tough underdogs confronting what could be termed a liberal cultural elite. This consisted of commercially successful punk bands such as Die Toten Hosen and Die Ärzte, as well as politicians and journalists (see Elflein 2014, 107). Such postures were subsequently adopted not only by other bands within Deutschrock, but also beyond the Deutschrock genre. The constant presence of this anti-elite discourse and the rising number of artists that thrive on populist provocations has to some degree produced a public sensitivity to far-right and populist discourses within music. At the same time, the market growth of such genres as Schlager and Deutschrock has also increased public exposure to some of the potentially nationalist and populist tropes that are central to these genres, such as Heimat, an underdog/oppressor dichotomy, gender binaries, and hypermasculinity in the case of Deutschrock, or the nationalisation of nature, food, music, and the notion of Volk in the case of Schlager, to name a few.

The Covid-19 pandemic

From March 2020, the major social disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the ways in which far-right populism is negotiated in German popular music culture. Economically, musicians were hit particularly hard by the pandemic (Betzler, Haselbach, and Kobler-Ringler 2021), not only because they could no longer play live, but also due to a supposed loophole in state support. Whilst financial assistance was available from the state for workers in many industries, there was no support for the living costs of the self-employed, including musicians as well as many related professions such as sound and lighting technicians. This economic insecurity – in addition to fears evoked by the pandemic and their exploitation by political entrepreneurs and the far-right – lent credibility to so-called alternative explanations (including conspiracy narratives) regarding the origins of the pandemic. Due to restrictions on face-to-face encounters, communication increasingly shifted to digital and social media. This facilitated the rapid spread of fake news and conspiracy narratives about the pandemic, as well as the formation of echo chambers and social media bubbles in which increasing numbers of people decoupled almost entirely from reputable sources of information. These conspiracy narratives fuelled anti-science sentiments. Consequently, reputable institutions of public health, such as the Robert Koch Institute, and renowned scientists like Christian Drosten were cast as corrupt villains in larger conspiracies against 'the people.' The scapegoating of individual renowned scientists was similar to the resentment against Anthony Fauci spurred by Donald Trump and the far right in the US. In Germany, a politically hybrid populist movement emerged in protest against state measures to contain the pandemic, such as compulsory mask-wearing, social distancing, quarantining, and vaccination. The so-called Querdenker movement (translated roughly as "unconventional thinkers") vented their dissatisfaction both online and at rallies.

As these protests led to a blurring of boundaries between ideological camps, the traditional mechanisms for isolating public discourse from the far-right became less effective (Nachtwey 2020). Moreover, there were those who saw these protests as a potential business model, such as the businessman Michael Ballweg, who set up the brand Querdenken 711 (Sternberg and Huesmann 2020).[9] The largest rallies against the pandemic measures involved about 30,000 people (Betschka 2020), and reached their climax on August 29, 2020 when about 500 demonstrators – mainly conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists – stormed the stairs of the Reichstag building in Berlin (dpa 2020). Even after this incident, some celebrity musicians expressed sympathy for the 'unconventional thinkers.' Amongst them was Nena (best known internationally for the song "99 Red Balloons"), and to a much larger degree Xavier Naidoo (dpa 2021).

As we have shown, the Multiple Opportunity Structures in Germany are unique in terms of historic, cultural, and legal frameworks, which means that there are limits to the mainstreaming of far-right populism to a certain extent. However, the

pandemic contributed to the blurring of the boundaries between ideological camps as well as to the emergence of alternative echo chambers. The following sections will examine the ways in which Xavier Naidoo and Andreas Gabalier contribute to the normalisation of far-right populism in the musical mainstream within this context, through the performance of their respective personae.

Xavier Naidoo: Between mainstream and underground persona

The fact that Xavier Naidoo came to occupy such a prominent role at the interface of mainstream German popular music, on one hand, and the populist anti-government protests during the pandemic, on the other, makes a closer look at his musical biography necessary. Naidoo's career is in many ways unique: he was born in 1971 in the city of Mannheim, a mid-sized town in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, in southwestern Germany. His father is of German-Indian origin whilst his mother has South African and Irish ancestors (Naidoo 2013, 11).

Naidoo first came to the attention of the German public with the R&B song "Freisein" ("Being free," 1997), which he recorded as a duet with the then highly successful rapper Sabrina Setlur; the single peaked at number 23 of the German singles charts (Fuchs-Gamböck and Klotz 2002, 56–58). In 1998, Naidoo released his solo album *Nicht von dieser Welt* (*Not of this world*), which achieved double platinum status in Germany and has sold over one million copies. As of March 2023, this album has been followed by nine others, five of which reached the top of the German album charts. Naidoo has also been involved in several commercially successful projects, such as Söhne Mannheims[10] (Sons of Mannheim) and Xavas (a collaboration with rapper Kool Savas), in addition to working as a guest singer with the 'who's who' of the German pop scene. Starting in 2010, Naidoo became involved in TV productions, including as a member of the jury for the talent show *The Voice of Germany*. He also took part in the show *Sing meinen Song*, in which German musicians perform songs originally written by other participating musicians, and in 2015 Naidoo received the Bambi German media award for his involvement. He has also been honoured with numerous other awards, including two MTV Music Awards for "Best German Act" (1999 and 2002) and six Echo awards (the most significant German popular music award until its abolition in 2018) (naidoo records GmbH n.d.).

Naidoo's popularity has often been attributed to his voice, which fans characterise as warm, soulful, amazing, and intense ("Hammerstimme") – an observation that was confirmed in short interviews that we conducted immediately before and after two concerts of his 2019 tour. Musically, Naidoo's output sits between pop, R&B, and soul. He has a dominant songwriting role in the case of both his solo releases and collaborations, and writes almost all of his own lyrics, contributing as a co-writer to the lyrics in his collaborations. A thematic focus of Naidoo's songs is love, which as he has stated in several interviews is less a question of romance

than love for God (Fuchs-Gamböck and Klotz 2002). Indeed, Naidoo's religious background is very pronounced – although he has always set himself apart from so-called contemporary Christian music (Flink 2006, 71). Naidoo is also remarkable as one of still very few German persons of colour who have achieved commercial success as celebrities or artists. Early in his career, he also participated in anti-racist initiatives such as the band Brothers Keepers, from which the song "Adriano (Letzte Warnung)" ("Adriano (Final Warning)") paid tribute to Alberto Adriano who was murdered by neo-Nazis in the city of Dessau in 2000 (also see Sommer 2021, 193–194). As such, Naidoo's position is somewhat controversial in German public life: whilst he has performed anti-racist music and certainly helped to make Germans of colour and their cultural achievements more visible in Germany, he has also served as a poster boy in the far-right's attempt to cleanse their image and legitimate essentially racist anti-migration policies (see Klotz 2021; Probst 2020; Laschyk 2020).

After 2000, Naidoo cultivated what we call a 'mainstream' persona, characterised by a certain aloofness and a smooth, untroubled demeanour. We use the term 'mainstream' here as Naidoo's persona is widely visible and defined by agreeable and artist-like behaviour. He seems primarily interested in creating significant moments of real affection through exceptional musicality, and this mainstream persona of a masterful singer whose ambitions are primarily artistic dominates Naidoo's live shows. Those that we attended as part of his "Hin und Weg" ("Blown away") tour in 2019 were comparatively unspectacular events: for one, Naidoo did not play any of his more controversial songs. Apart from some interactions with the audience, he mostly stood in front of his microphone in a chic smart-casual outfit, including his iconic sunglasses and flat cap, and sang his greatest hits. Undoubtedly, Naidoo's mainstream persona, which he has also performed in TV shows (including Gabalier's *MTV Unplugged* concert mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), dominated his public image before the pandemic.

However, Naidoo also began to build what we identify as a second persona early in his career. We call this his 'underground persona,' since it is set in a world in which the official – official narratives, government institutions, official history, official truths, etc. – tends to be corrupted, and where truth and reality exist under the surface. This underground persona belongs to an unofficial world in which sectarianism and rebellion are necessary to defend truth and meaning in the world. The underground persona is therefore characterised by the performance of non-conformity, political engagement, and a rebelliousness against all that it considers 'official.' Naidoo uses this persona to make (political) statements that are generally rejected within the musical mainstream, as well as in large parts of German society. In the 1990s and 2000s, it can be witnessed primarily in interviews as well as in a few of his less popular – but released nonetheless – songs. In 1999, Naidoo gave a long interview to the German music magazine *Musikexpress*, in which he expressed various concerning opinions including scepticism of science ("I haven't believed any scientist for a long time"[11]), anti-Americanism, reservations about

"foreigners," and a Mannheimers-first local patriotism ("To me, God and his creation as well as human beings are sacred. And before I do good to any animals or foreigners [sic], I rather act for Mannheim"[12]) (von Stahl 1999, 30). When asked about his position on racism, Naidoo replied that he is "a racist without regard to skin colour. I'm no more a racist than any Japanese person is."[13] He also declared that "I'm proud to be a German. And as a black man I can say that without any hidden agenda"[14] (von Stahl 1999, 30).

Shortly after the beginning of the Euro crisis in 2008, Naidoo released the song "Raus aus dem Reichstag" ("Get out of the Reichstag") (Naidoo 2009), in which his persona fantasises about drinking the blood of politicians, repeats conspiracy theories, and reinforces antisemitic tropes such as the Rothschild conspiracy. Notably, the song was not released as a single but appeared on the album *Alles kann besser werden*, and was largely ignored by Germany's mainstream media.

In 2011, Naidoo was asked on the public broadcaster ZDF's morning show, having been invited to present the Söhne Mannheims single "Freiheit" ("Freedom"), whether he thought that Germany was a free country. In his answer, the performance of his mainstream persona momentarily cracked when Naidoo replied indignantly: "No, we are not free. We are still an occupied country. Germany has no peace treaty and accordingly Germany is not a real country and not free"[15] (TheProvinzreflexion 2011). This echoes the line of argument put forward by the Reichsbürgerbewegung (Reich Citizens' Movement) – a heterogeneous group that includes right-wing extremists and conspiracy theorists that question the legitimacy of the German state. The Reichsbürger ideology is a specifically German phenomenon that emerged after the Second World War. One can find various manifestations of this conspiracy theory: some members believe that the Allied occupation never ended and that Germany is therefore not a sovereign state. Others postulate that no peace treaty was conducted after WW2, and that Germany therefore still exists within the borders of the German Reich. Some in the Reichsbürger movement also claim that Germany is not a state at all, but a company run by 'dark forces' (Rathje 2017, 46). The unifying element of the movement is a profound hostility towards democracy, hence its close surveillance by the German intelligence service (Verfassungsschutz).[16]

In 2014, Naidoo attended an event organised by the Reichsbürgerbewegung (Weissbarth 2014). When his appearance at the rally was met with criticism in the left-wing and liberal media, Naidoo replied with the song "Die Wahrheit" ("The Truth") (Xavier Naidoo 2014) – released exclusively on YouTube. "Die Wahrheit" is the only song to have been released under the name "Straßenunterhaltungsdienst" ("Road entertainment/maintenance service"). This is an indication that the song is not an official statement by Naidoo's mainstream persona. In the song, Naidoo's underground and mainstream persona seem to merge: the voice in "Die Wahrheit" is identical to Naidoo's underground persona, and addresses the audience directly with a spoken intro that opens with "My dear friends, this is Xavier speaking."[17] Naidoo's underground persona presents his world view in the song,

and attacks the journalists that criticised him as well as political and financial elites for their ostensible hypocrisy. The underground persona also references Naidoo's hit song "Dieser Weg" ("This road") – the official song selected by the German team during the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany (rpo 2006) – reinterpreting the line "this will not be an easy road" as the road to "the truth."

Whilst the concerts that we attended in 2019 staged Naidoo's mainstream persona consistently, Naidoo fundamentally changed his performance strategy at the beginning of the pandemic. Beginning in spring 2020, Naidoo's underground persona superseded his mainstream one. The vast majority of Naidoo's output (songs, videos on Telegram, etc.) indicated that he had devoted himself almost entirely to political activism to oppose a 'corrupt elite' that was trying to restrict people's freedom. This is clear from Naidoo's countless posts and retweets on Telegram, for instance, where he sought to reveal that the pandemic was a lie. To mention only one of many posts, on May 22, 2021, Naidoo posted the letters "PFIZRAEL" (Naidoo 2021). By merging the name of one of the leading pharmaceutical companies that developed a Covid-19 vaccine (Pfizer) and the state of Israel, Naidoo suggested that the pharmaceutical company and Israel were somehow 'in cahoots' over the allegedly fake pandemic – a clearly antisemitic claim in line with the antisemitism he had expressed in earlier songs (Baier and Hermann 2022).

Conversely, whilst Naidoo posted conspiratorial content on social media, no controversial statements appeared on his official website. This could be understood as an attempt to maintain at least a remnant of his uncontroversial mainstream persona. It is also possible that the official website is administered by a management team rather than Naidoo himself, and that the former are more reluctant to adopt a communication style that could prove commercially harmful. In addition, it may also indicate that Naidoo intentionally addresses different audiences in different ways. Whilst the audience for his official website may be those who are interested in Naidoo's music and mainly follow his mainstream persona, the Telegram channel is aimed at opponents of the measures to contain the pandemic.

In addition to Naidoo's activities on social media, he released no fewer than five songs between October 2020 and August 2021. These songs positioned Naidoo as probably the best-known musical representative of the movement against the Covid-19 mandates. In autumn 2020, Naidoo released the song "Wohnhaft in Deutschland" (a pun that can mean both "Residing in Germany" and "House Arrest in Germany") with the YouTuber Dave Byrch (Rolling Stone 2020), attacking alleged political elites who oppress 'the people' by imposing restrictions on face-to-face contact and quarantine regulations. This was followed by a collaboration between Naidoo and the pseudonymous musician and activist Jan S. in early 2021 (Jordan 2021), again attacking the government for its anti-Covid measures. In May of the same year, Naidoo released "Ich mach da nicht mit" ("I do not go along with this") in collaboration with the rapper collective Rapbellions, whose critique of the Covid-19 vaccination was based on several conspiracy narratives

(Klarmann 2021a; Skudlarek 2021; Zips 2021). Finally, a collaborative anti-vaccination song featuring Xavier Naidoo and Hannes Ostendorf – who is also the singer of the right-wing extremist hooligan band Kategorie C – was released under the title "Deutschland krempelt die Ärmel hoch" ("Germany rolls up its sleeves") in August 2021. This latter collaboration in particular was proof that Naidoo had turned his back on the musical mainstream (Klarmann 2021b).[18]

Naidoo's initiation of the project Die Konferenz, in which he has collaborated with conspiracy theorists, sectarians, and activists from the extreme right, is particularly noteworthy ("Die Konferenz" 2021). The song "Heimat" (Homeland), which emerged from this collaboration in May 2021, combines populism, nationalism, and conspiracy theories. "Heimat" was released as both an MP3 file and a music video. The audio alone describes an alleged majority of homogeneous people who defend their homeland against a corrupt elite. With the addition of the visual dimension in the video, however, the song's meaning changes. The visuals frame the German government's Covid-19 measures as equivalent to the exercise of power over the (national) people by an elite and its henchmen. The video shows various images of street protests against the Covid mandates, staging resistance against the measures as righteous and heroic.

Though most of the songs were removed from YouTube for containing misinformation about the pandemic, they spread quickly via social networks, notably reaching the politically heterogeneous group of those opposed to the government's Covid-19 measures. Moreover, there were many attempts to re-upload the songs to YouTube (though they were again taken down soon after). In general, Naidoo's mainstream persona was pushed backwards during the pandemic. Whilst this made it impossible for major concert venues and promoters to book Naidoo, social media's increasing significance gave Naidoo's underground persona the opportunity to connect more directly with his fans and attract a more radical fan base (Houmsi, Panek, and Wildschutz 2022; Dittrich and Holnburger 2021). Unsurprisingly then, as a result of Naidoo's radicalisation, the extreme right began to gravitate towards him. The far-right journalist Jürgen Elsässer, for instance, interviewed Naidoo for a special issue of the right-wing extremist magazine *Compact* on the musician in early 2020 (Glaser 2020). Conversely, Naidoo has not been interviewed by music magazines and the liberal media since the beginning of the pandemic.

As we have shown, Naidoo performed two different personae simultaneously until the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020: on one hand, a politically outspoken, irate, and righteous underground persona that was barely visible in public discourse, and on the other, a seemingly apolitical, uncontroversial, mainstream, and aloof one, frequently present in the media. He thereby gave audiences the choice of these two personae with which to associate selectively. Before largely dropping his mainstream persona, maintaining the two allowed Naidoo to be successful and highly visible without having to relinquish his far-right views; he simply relegated their articulation to his other, less visible, underground persona.

As Naidoo's underground persona came increasingly to attract those from the far-right, his mainstream persona continued to appeal to a broad audience interested in seemingly apolitical and sophisticated German-language popular music.

Whilst one can separate between these two personae, it is important to recognise that they also complement one another. Those familiar with Naidoo's underground persona find hidden messages in the lyrics of his mainstream songs, framing key concepts such as "truth" (Wahrheit), "the road" (der Weg), "jail" (Knast), or his call "to claim our heaven on earth" (holen wir uns den Himmel auf Erden) as reaffirmations of a conspiratorial worldview. Alternatively, at least before he more or less abandoned his mainstream persona during the pandemic, it was also possible to frame Naidoo as simply an exceptional singer of benign pop songs. In a way, then, Naidoo's mainstream persona thus served as a polyvalent signifier whose meanings depended largely on the knowledge, social position, cultural location, and political views of the listener.

By pioneering this cultivation of multiple personae – whether intentional or not – Naidoo also developed a strategy for normalising populist far-right discourses in popular culture before the pandemic. Naidoo's ability to maintain his underground persona whilst being celebrated as one of Germany's most popular musicians for over two decades was enabled by a lack of knowledge, scrutiny, and serious attention regarding contemporary popular music culture by German decision-makers in cultural politics and the establishment media. Naidoo was thus afforded a platform to establish a celebrity status for his mainstream persona, which then became a kind of pop-cultural capital that the far-right could appropriate in their attempt to normalise their populist discourse, aligning themselves with icons from the mainstream. When a popular mainstream singer such as Naidoo becomes a mascot for a right-wing extremist magazine such as *Compact*, for instance, this association also allows the magazine to claim the 'normality' of its arguments, thereby legitimising them. Additionally, those listeners who were initially drawn to Naidoo's music aesthetically, and wanted to dig a little deeper into his oeuvre, were confronted with the spectacle of a seemingly mainstream artist articulating far-right and antisemitic discourses that they may not have encountered otherwise. In such cases, any previous identification with Naidoo could lend credibility to the more extreme views of his underground persona. It is precisely the interface between Naidoo's personae, therefore, that serves to facilitate the normalisation of populist and far-right discourses.

The pandemic demonstrated what can happen if the balance between these two personae is lost: with the outbreak of Covid-19, Naidoo's mainstream persona was largely superseded by his underground one. Although the celebrity status he had attained now helped him to disseminate extremist positions beyond the political fringes, however, Naidoo also lost opportunities to reach larger audiences as he became progressively less palatable for many establishment media outlets, TV shows, record labels, and event managers.

As of May 2023, Naidoo has been unable to regain his pre-pandemic success, even though he has appeared to want to polish up his mainstream brand since at

least early 2022. In April 2022, Naidoo released a three-minute apology statement, saying that he had been deeply affected by the war in Ukraine, and adding that his wife is Ukrainian. He went on to admit that he had followed some "wrong paths" in the past and that he had made "disturbing" statements. According to him, he had gotten "on the wrong track" and opened up to "theories, views, and partly to groups" from which he now sought "to distance himself," including "from all extremes, in particular from right-wing and conspiracist groups" (Xavier Naidoo 2022).[19] The statement remains vague about the time period covered by Naidoo's apology, and says nothing about his antisemitic lyrics or posts. It remains to be seen whether this attempt to backpedal will eventually allow him to revive his artistic career and become commercially successful again. Naidoo's name became inextricably linked with conspiracy theories, right-wing extremism, and antisemitism during the pandemic in Germany, however, and his statement seems to have been too short and vague to convincingly signal a clear cut.

Andreas Gabalier

Andreas Gabalier (born in 1984), who is thirteen years younger than Naidoo, both deviates from and draws on Naidoo as a popular artist. The beginnings of Gabalier's career and brand coincided with the Great Recession in the late 2000s. Since then, he has become one of the most popular musicians in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. In many ways, the commercial success of Naidoo and others with a new kind of Afrodiasporic German-language popular music in the 1990s helped to create a market for musicians such as Gabalier in the 2000s and 2010s. Gabalier's background was in German-language Schlager and folk music, and his brand draws heavily on the icons, visual aesthetics, and music of Southern rock, rockabilly, and country music. Furthermore, Gabalier's creative output is strongly influenced by Afrodiasporic music, including rhythm and blues of the mid-twentieth century, rock'n'roll, contemporary R&B, soul, and even swing. Beyond their common ground as would-be modernisers of German-language popular music, both musicians have also performed their musical and personal proximity on stage, in shared performances such as Gabalier's *MTV Unplugged* show, and by expressing mutual admiration and friendship.

Like Naidoo, Gabalier is often discussed in the context of right-wing populism, a popular concept in Germany during the 2010s that is, however, often used vaguely to designate a large array of phenomena associated with the political right. The extent to which Gabalier actually performs populism, or aspects of right-wing discourse, is in fact rarely addressed in public and merits further attention. Whilst Gabalier does not openly support any political party, his statements have repeatedly corresponded to the communication strategy of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), a close partner of the AfD. Gabalier has, for instance, repeated the idea that public discourse is determined by left-leaning liberals imposing their agenda – such as the dissolution of gender and sexual boundaries – on a supposedly homogeneous 'people,' the majority of whom are said to prefer the traditional family

unit with clear-cut gender roles. In addition to opposing this alleged "gender madness" ("Genderwahnsinn") (Zeidler 2014, 212; Wietschorke 2023), Gabalier has also repeatedly reaffirmed other far-right framings, including the idea that Austria is not really a democracy and that the liberal left's goal is to restrict people's freedom, including freedom of speech. What is more, Gabalier's positioning clearly draws on a populist style of performance: he poses as the people's spokesperson, deriving authority from his deeply-felt allegiance to his rural home (Wietschorke 2023). This performance of biographical authenticity – the story of his Styrian origins – emboldens Gabalier to speak out against what he sees as the elite's attempt to suppress the people. This was most obvious in a TV appearance in 2014, in which Gabalier questioned the legitimacy of the Austrian parliament as a representative, democratic institution. Amongst other things, he claimed that radio polls indicated that the parliament's decision to change the lyrics of the Austrian national anthem to include women was not endorsed by the majority of the people, and therefore was not truly democratic (see the introduction to this volume).[20]

Any analysis of Gabalier's persona must consider the particularities of genre. Even if Gabalier's music transcends narrow generic confines, he can be located most appropriately in the Schlager and folk music (volkstümliche Musik) tradition, which has experienced a resurgence of popularity over the last two decades. Gabalier appears regularly at Germany's major Schlager shows and festivals, and his celebration of folk clothing styles, regional and traditional foods, and the countryside evoke associations of a generic context that would include popular folk musicians such as Heino (born 1938). Interestingly, in 2013, Heino – a singer of traditional folk songs who has been criticised for re-interpreting Wehrmacht songs – enjoyed a late commercial success with versions of German-language hip-hop and rock songs (Schiller 2020; Baier 2023). On the question of persona, Schlager and folk music afford a unique set of tropes that serve to lend authenticity. For instance, the trope of rural belonging (to a heartland, a region, a village, or a landscape) is very common; indeed, the concept of Heimat never disappeared after World War II, despite its central function in National Socialist propaganda. For this reason, Gabalier's persona has to be understood against the backdrop of these performative genre conventions.

Unlike Naidoo, Gabalier's persona cannot be divided into an underground and a mainstream one. Although performances of his persona have certainly changed over time (such as during the pandemic), they are, at any given moment, much more consistent than Naidoo's. Gabalier does make political statements on stage, and does perform protest songs whose messages are mostly consistent with his statements in interviews and on social media. Nonetheless, tensions exist between different aspects of his persona: Gabalier's performances are of both an exceptional, internationally successful, worldly artist on the one hand, and a grassroots, everyday guy bound to the countryside, on the other. Whilst a certain tension between the performance of commonness and the exceptional is typical of many celebrities, Gabalier repeatedly accentuates his rural belonging and ordinariness,

for instance repeating that he is a “Bergbauerbuam” (a mountain farmer’s boy) in songs (e.g. Gabalier 2010) as well as announcements (Rützel 2018). At the same time, Gabalier’s brand is also that of an internationally significant musician. For instance, he has boasted about his friendship with Arnold Schwarzenegger, and repeatedly emphasised that he has recorded in Nashville, Tennessee. In fact, whilst this may seem contradictory, Gabalier’s performances of rural ordinariness and worldly distinction are inextricably intertwined. In this sense, Gabalier is different to Naidoo, whose mainstream persona clearly poses as regionally rooted but thoroughly urban (located in urban Mannheim). Moreover, Gabalier’s constant reiteration of both his seemingly rural ordinariness and worldly distinction is a central performance strategy: at the concerts of his that we attended in 2019, Gabalier’s management screened his latest music video: a duet with Schwarzenegger, in which the two Styrian celebrities cycle through Los Angeles. At the Berlin concert, Gabalier referred to his music as “Styrian Dialect Music Made in Berlin” (“Steirische Mundart-Musik Made in Berlin”), and emphasised that he felt “at home” since it was in Berlin that he produced all of his successful albums. Gabalier’s persona therefore includes performances of these two different realms. It is important to note that Gabalier’s performance of these aspects is based on a chronology: he performs as an originally rural, ordinary artist who has had the good fortune to become internationally successful, but has remained (physically as well as emotionally) rooted in and loyal to the Styrian countryside. As Gabalier’s persona performatively reaffirms his biographical authenticity via the story of his essentially rural origins, audience interest in him as an artist is hardly distinguishable from an interest in the otherwise private person, the ostensibly “real” and authentic Gabalier.

The extent to which Gabalier invites identification with his seemingly private person was obvious at two concerts that we attended in 2019, at Waldbühne Berlin and the Veltins Arena stadium in Gelsenkirchen. Gabalier’s shows seek to provide a fully immersive experience facilitated not only by large screens and highly professional sound equipment, but also through a participative, transmedia marketing strategy that encourages fans to dress up in pseudo-traditional folkloric outfits that include lederhosen, suspenders, plaid shirts, and dirndls. Europe’s largest internet trader, the Otto group, even has a Gabalier brand that uses the musician’s name to market its own pseudo-traditional clothing lines. The fact that Gabalier-style clothes are easily available – even in regions that have no historical association whatsoever with such outfits – allows listeners to equip themselves with the trappings of fan paraphernalia. This practice of dressing up is reminiscent of football culture, where wearing the colours of one’s team comes with the feeling of participating more fully in that team’s performance.

In addition to inviting audiences to participate through dress, the shows that we attended also offered a programme that allowed for strong bonding experiences. Each show opened with a fifteen-minute medley which not only served as a warm-up for the audience, but also created opportunities to sympathise with the

singer's bodily experience. At the end of this medley, Gabalier would lie on the stage in silence for a few minutes, seemingly unable to move. Had the singer suffered a heart attack, or simply burned himself out? Cameras zoomed in on Gabalier, allowing the audience to see the musician's exhaustion, the sweat on his body, the chest rising and falling. After a while, Gabalier would rise to drink an entire bottle of water – all of this only fifteen minutes into the show. More than simply a break for the artist, the moment served to bond Gabalier with his audience, encouraging people to feel close to him by focusing on a moment of vulnerability, his thirst, his suffering, and his self-sacrifice for them.

This was only one of several moments in which Gabalier performed his bodily experience as private and personal, thereby affording a bonding experience for the audience by arousing concern for his well-being. The next moment, however, he had returned to embodying the professional, exceptional artist, and showing off his musical prowess. Later on, his performance shifted again to that of a political artist, voicing his personal opinion on matters of contemporary politics. Likewise, his communications via social media similarly emphasise the ostensible integrity of Gabalier, both private person and performer.

In the context of musical populism, this performance strategy allows Gabalier to perform simultaneously as an exceptional artist and representative of the people, embodying the common man from the countryside who must face down the headwinds of a vague but powerful oppositional force. The performance of rurality therefore goes hand in hand with Gabalier's authority as a voice of the people in opposition to an elite. It is important to note, in light of the heavy emphasis on folk belonging at Gabalier's shows, that these are to a large extent middle-class events. Most of the people that we talked to had come in groups, with many families in attendance. People had not only spent a lot of money on expensive tickets, but were also able to buy dinner and drinks at the events, including a one-litre bowl of strawberries for €15 that seemed particularly popular at the Berlin concert. Gabalier's shows, therefore, are hardly accessible to all 'the people.' This is precisely how political mainstreaming works in the case of Gabalier: by inviting his largely middle-class audience to bond with his seemingly private and authentic persona – Andy from the Styrian countryside – Gabalier's performances push their audiences to adopt and take sides within populist narratives and frames, thus increasing the felt credibility of such narratives.

However, during the pandemic, some of the limitations of Gabalier's performance strategy revealed themselves. Before the pandemic, the specificity of Gabalier's persona came with a set of presuppositions quite different to Naidoo. Since Gabalier's persona is based on continuously performing a close attachment to the people, his success depends on the perceived intactness of this attachment. At the beginning of the pandemic, therefore, one might have expected Gabalier to respond to the discourse about a common need for security, harmony, and community in such a way as to maintain this central pillar of his persona.

In many ways, one can understand his first release during the pandemic, the song "Neuer Wind" ("New wind"), in this context. The music video shows Gabalier in an abandoned building in a forest, accompanying himself on the piano whilst singing about "a divided country finding its way back to the centre and sticking [itself] together again" (Andreas Gabalier 2020). [21] His next song, "LiebeLeben," can be seen to go one step further in addressing pandemic-related needs: in the video, Gabalier dances with a diverse group of colourfully-dressed people in a street surrounded by cars, in a scene that recalls the opening scene of *La La Land* (Chazelle 2016). The video seems to signal an embrace of diversity across dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, body shape, and age (Andreas Gabalier 2021). The choreography is based mainly on sign language, and the dancers alternate between what looks like rehearsed and improvised dancing, evoking an inclusive and participatory approach to the music.

The fact that the video's opening scene shows children trying to perform the dance moves, in a "Macarena"-esque fashion, underscores how the song's message of community and inclusion is aimed at a young audience. These messages corresponded to the need for community across boundaries at a time when communal experiences were suddenly restricted. As such, they offered a counterpoint to government measures such as isolation and social distancing designed to contain the pandemic. The video also raises the question of whether Gabalier's management was aware of the fact that younger audiences in German-speaking countries increasingly value tolerance, diversity, and green politics, as studies were indicating (Albert, Hurrelmann, and Quenzel 2019). Indeed, as comments on YouTube suggest, many listeners approved of this new direction from Gabalier, even though some right-leaning members of Gabalier's audience expressed disappointment at what they saw as a betrayal. As one listener put it, in a comment somewhat reminiscent of a Donald Trump tweet: "Sad, making such a song now only to look good in society, I can still remember quite well that YOU made homophobic statements and now this, everyone just wants money these days, sad."[22] As the political orientation of Gabalier's musical output shifted during the pandemic, Gabalier also refrained from making political statements, thereby largely avoiding anything that might contradict his musical performances.

One could therefore argue that Gabalier's persona shifted for a limited time during the pandemic. However, Gabalier never assumed two personae simultaneously, and instead consistently adapted his transmedial performances to a new political moment. Consequently, as government measures were lifted in the spring of 2022, Gabalier once again changed his performance strategy, returning to his pre-pandemic persona of a rebellious rock star defying government directives. At a show hosted by the popular Schlager singer and moderator Giovanni Zarrella, Gabalier talked about his recent studio recordings in Nashville, saying that Americans were much more "relaxed" regarding Covid-19, and that their disregard for masks and vaccination certificates signalled the "pure joy

of life" ("Lebensfreude pur"). Noticing the provocative political undertone in Gabalier's words, Zarrella immediately jumped in with "Everything at the right time! I think we are handling this in a pretty reasonable way" (Wolfsgruber 2022). [23] As his performances revived the pre-pandemic persona of the provocateur, Gabalier's music likewise returned to his pre-pandemic rockabilly- and rock-infused Schlager sound.

As we have demonstrated, Gabalier's persona combines different performances: as simultaneously an outstanding artist of international renown and a representative of the people, the embodiment of a common, decent, rural identity bravely resisting a vague but powerful oppositional force. Within the framework of populism, this allows Gabalier to reach wide audiences not by clearly demarcating his more radical views, as in the case of Naidoo, but rather by performing as someone who represents and speaks on behalf of the people. In so doing, Gabalier performatively redefines the people as a regionally, rurally, and ethnically bound – and in this sense homogeneous – group, with supposedly traditional values, that stands in opposition to the directives of an allegedly liberal political, cultural, and media elite. The worldliness of Gabalier's persona complements this positioning as a voice of the people: it enables an analogy to be drawn from the local level – the Styrian musician speaking for the Styrian people, and the Austrian musician representing the Austrian people – and translated to a larger, international framework. Although Gabalier does not pose as an ethnic representative of the German people, he nonetheless casts the struggles that he identifies locally as relevant to broader, international contexts. As such, Gabalier's claim is to give voice to the larger populist struggle of a vaguely defined people against an elite that constitutes the social order across national borders.

Gabalier's performances as a supposed voice of the people are powerful in that they draw on affect and invite people to wholeheartedly invest and participate in them, whether through clothing, dancing, singing, drinking, or merely deep sympathising with the musician's physical vulnerability, his musical martyrdom for his fans, and his life story. In a way, this performance style required Gabalier to take a different path during the pandemic to Naidoo. As the latter articulated crude conspiracy theories on social media, Gabalier toned down his public political statements, and instead performed as someone who was in tune with contemporary discussions around people's need for harmony, community, and social contact, generally becoming more inclusive. Whilst in the case of Naidoo, the pandemic led to an overall radicalisation of his (media) performances – his underground persona largely replacing the mainstream one – Gabalier's far-right populism and nationalism were decidedly less pronounced.

However, it seems that Gabalier's desire to express a common need for tolerance, openness, and community at a time of increased social isolation and closed borders was limited to the period from 2020 to 2022. Indeed, some of the statements that Gabalier made as pandemic-related social restrictions were being lifted in early 2022 indicate that he was reviving his pre-pandemic performance

style. Between April and June 2022, Gabalier posted three music videos on YouTube under the titles "Ein neuer Anfang" ("A new beginning"), "Südtirol" ("South Tyrol") and "Bügel Dein Dirndl gscheit auf" ("Iron your dirndl dress properly") (Andreas Gabalier 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). The latter two songs in particular indicate a return to Gabalier's pre-Covid persona. Furthermore, the videos all indicate that Gabalier had remained true to his presentation of himself as a simple man of the people rooted in the Styrian countryside, with – as before the pandemic – a tendency to focus on conservative themes and the propagation of neo-traditionalist gender roles delivered in a provocative style. If Naidoo maintained two personas *simultaneously* before and after the pandemic, Gabalier adapted and readapted his overall persona to the historical moment and the apparent demands of his potential audiences.

Conclusion

The cases of Naidoo and Gabalier exemplify the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the opportunities for and obstacles to the mainstreaming of right-wing and far-right populism in German-language popular music. Although Naidoo and Gabalier had been like-minded allies before it, their responses to the challenges of the pandemic were radically different. Whilst speculation about the artists' personal or psychological motivations is moot, however, we argue that their actions during the pandemic were not independent of what had gone before it. Rather, they were facilitated by their previous performance styles. This meant the construction of two distinct personae in Naidoo's case, and of a synchronously consistent – but diachronically adaptable – folk-artist persona in Gabalier's. Although certainly susceptible to genre conventions, the performance of these personae is not reducible to them. Gabalier developed a unique persona that served to both produce and project politicised and politicisable longings in contemporary German-speaking countries. From the beginning, Gabalier's persona was constructed as an embodiment of folk authenticity that included his self-appointed role as a true voice of the people, channelling their genuine feelings whilst potentially opposing decisions taken by representative democratic institutions. As we have shown here, the ways in which Gabalier performs as a voice of the people offer audiences various dimensions through which to relate to him, be they narrative, cultural, sensory, or affective.

Naidoo, on the other hand, provides two personae for audiences to relate to. One persona is superficially apolitical – the clean image of a masterful popular singer whose interest is his craft. This persona tends not to make political comments, does not express radical views, and is highly compatible with the mainstream market, which it has navigated successfully for over two decades. Naidoo's second persona, however, had for a long time been much less visible, but was always much more radical than Gabalier's. We have argued that Naidoo's split persona performance style provides another model for the mainstreaming of far-right populism

in popular music culture. The use of dual personae allowed Naidoo to speak to highly diverse audiences, and to serve as a kind of hinge between the popular mainstream and the far-right – a space that is fluid rather than hermetically sealed. Not only did the celebrity status of his mainstream persona aid the symbolic legitimisation of far-right ideas (e.g. in *Compact* magazine), but it also helped to move the far-right extremism of his underground persona into close proximity with significant numbers of unsuspecting listeners. On some of his albums – as well as on streaming platforms – some of Naidoo's most radical, antisemitic, and conspiracist songs, though not always popular, are only one click away from his most cherished mainstream hits.

Although our discussion of these artists has sought to exemplify some of the mechanisms by which populism and nationalism have been and are normalised in German-language popular music culture, Naidoo and Gabalier are by no means the only musicians at the interface of populism and popular music in Germany. Understanding populism as a cultural phenomenon means recognising that it is not reducible to a few individual musicians or groups. Besides those musicians who have already been widely debated as populist or right-wing populist in Germany – from the South Tyrolian Deutschrock band Frei.Wild to the rapper Kollegah (see Botsch 2020; Hindrichs 2018) – populism in German popular music also extends to the use of music by political actors (Ginkel et al. 2023; Dunkel 2021), everyday musical practices, and cultural changes. What unites all of these areas, however, is that the performance of persona remains central to an understanding of the politics of contemporary popular music.

Notes

1 The term dictatorship of opinion (Meinungsdiktatur) is widespread in German-speaking far-right populism. In some ways similar to the concept of cancel culture, it implies that (liberal) elites are restricting and suppressing freedom of speech (Lanius 2020, 78).
2 For the purposes of this article, we use the term 'mainstream' to refer to popular music in German-speaking countries that is widely received and whose reach goes beyond culturally specific camps.
3 RTL fired Naidoo in March 2020 after he published a racist statement via Telegram.
4 For an excellent in-depth analysis of the role of music on Naidoo's Telegram channel see Engelke 2023.
5 Take, for instance, this line from Georg Büchner's 1834 pamphlet *Der Hessische Landbote*, in which he calls for people to revolt against the aristocracy: "the life of the nobility is a long Sunday: they live in beautiful houses, wear delicate clothes, have well-nourished faces, and speak their own language; the people, however, are lying before them, like manure on the field" (Büchner 1834, 6, our translation) ["Das Leben der Vornehmen ist ein langer Sonntag: sie wohnen in schönen Häusern, sie tragen zierliche Kleider, sie haben feiste Gesichter und reden eine eigne Sprache; das Volk aber liegt vor ihnen wie Dünger auf dem Acker"].
6 The song "0815" was released on the EP *§185*, part of the special limited edition of their highly successful album *JBG3* (2017). The special edition was indexed by the Federal

Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors in 2018 due to four songs classified as "brutalising" and "discriminatory" (BPjM 2018, 15).

7 As these concepts are often confused in public discourse, it is worth clarifying that indexing is not the same as total censorship. Indexing prohibits the promotion and selling of specific music in public, but the possession of indexed music is not an offence.

8 According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, Germany is the fourth largest market for recorded music (IFPI 2022). Before the pandemic, the music sector in general had seen a period of rapid growth that was also facilitated by the great popularity of live music events (BDKV et al. 2020).

9 The Querdenken brand was used to coordinate parts of the protests (e.g. rallies) against the state measures to contain the pandemic. In addition to the original brand, Querdenken 711 (711 is the telephone code for the city of Stuttgart), other spin-offs initiated by Ballweg emerged during the pandemic, such as Querdenken 421 (for Bremen) and Querdenken 911 (for Nuremberg) (Sternberg and Huesmann 2020). Ballweg ran the movement's homepage, through which merchandise was sold, amongst other things. Furthermore, he repeatedly called for private donations (Laufer 2020). This allowed him to raise hundreds of thousands of euros, but in the summer of 2022, Ballweg was arrested on suspicion of fraud and money laundering. As of February 2023, he is still in custody due to risk of absconding (dpa Baden-Württemberg 2023).

10 Söhne Mannheims is a soul/pop project with a changing line-up, whose musicians are all from the city of Mannheim. Xavier Naidoo is one of its founders, and the band enjoyed great success in German-speaking countries in the 2000s. This was due in part to Naidoo's popularity at the time, as he was by far the best-known musician in the band. Naidoo left the project in 2020.

11 "[I]ch glaube schon lange keinem Wissenschaftler mehr."

12 "Mir ist Gott und danach der Mensch als seine Schöpfung heilig. Und bevor ich irgendwelchen Tieren oder Ausländern Gutes tue, agiere ich lieber für Mannheim."

13 "[E]in Rassist ohne Ansehen der Hautfarbe. Ich bin nicht mehr Rassist als jeder Japaner das auch ist."

14 "Ich bin stolz, ein Deutscher zu sein. Und als Schwarzer kann ich das ohne irgendwelche Hintergedanken sagen."

15 "Aber nein, wir sind nicht frei. Wir sind immer noch ein besetztes Land. Deutschland hat keinen Friedensvertrag und dementsprechend ist Deutschland auch kein echtes Land und nicht frei."

16 An example of the movement's hostility towards democracy was the planned coup that a group of Reichsbürger intended to carry out against the German government in December 2022 (Baumgärtner et al. 2022).

17 "So ihr Lieben, hier ist der Xaver." The intro is spoken in the Mannheim dialect. For readability, our transcription is without dialect. After the intro, the actual song begins, with Naidoo singing in standard German.

18 Apparently, the collaboration between Ostendorf and Naidoo (as a musician of colour) was quite controversial on the extreme right, as can be seen from an interview that Ostendorf gave to the right-wing extremist YouTube channel Deutsche Stimme (DS-TV 2021). The interviewer here seems visibly puzzled by Ostendorf's musical collaboration with a "migrant" (DS-TV 2021).

19 "Ich habe erkannt, auf welchen Irrwegen ich mich teilweise befunden habe. [. . .] Ich habe mich Theorien, Sichtweisen und teilweise auch Gruppierungen geöffnet, von denen ich mich ohne wenn-und-aber distanziere und lossage. [. . .] Mir ist es deshalb wichtig, Euch zu sagen, dass ich mich von allen Extremen distanziere – insbesondere und vor allem auch von rechten und verschwörerischen Gruppen."

20 For a discussion of the right-wing populist trope of the silent majority see Müller 2016b.

21 "A g'spoitenes Land find' zur Mitten z'rück und hoitet wieder z'samm."
22 "traurig jetzt so ein lied zu machen nur um gut in der Gesellschaft dazustehen, ich kann mich noch ganz gut daran erinnern das DU mal Homophobe aussagen gebracht hat und jetzt sowas, sind doch alle nur noch aufs geld aus traurig" Nico J. (comment on music video) (Andreas Gabalier 2021).
23 "Alles zu seiner Zeit! Ich finde wir machen das schon ganz vernünftig."

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AFTERWORD

Popular music and populism in Europe

Mario Dunkel and Melanie Schiller

In *Reactionary Democracy*, Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter argue that what they term "populist hype" (2020, 7), far from elucidating current patterns of political change, has in fact helped to legitimise and normalise far-right ideas. By populist hype they refer to the excessive focus on populism, in both journalism and academia, to describe what in many instances would be better understood as far-right ideology. We agree with Mondon and Winter's assessment. We hope, however, that the chapters collected here also serve to demonstrate how the frame of populism, despite its often flawed application, is nonetheless crucial to developing an understanding of contemporary political and cultural change. This volume's discursive and performative approach to the study of populism allows for a non-essentialising and context-based analysis of populist articulations that is sensitive to questions of adaptability and the enmeshment of different political discourses (such as that of populism with nationalism, nativism, and far-right ideologies). Although the authors involved in this project set off from an open and inclusive understanding of populism that was not confined to either left or right-wing politics, their fieldwork and analyses show that in all of the national cases studied, the predominant varieties entail a combination of populism and nationalism.

Besides its versatility and ability to describe the construction of antagonisms between a people and an elite which are not necessarily tied to one political ideology exclusively, the term populism has a number of other advantages when it comes to studying the politics of contemporary popular cultures. Firstly, it does not risk framing a particular musical practice as a threat to democracy *per se*. As populism can be both a resource for democratic emancipation and a frame to be employed by politicians seeking to actually disempower communities, it is important to approach the complex field of popular culture with a high degree of sensitivity to ideological ambivalences and affordances. The chapters in this

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book account for the fact that some of the articulations addressed therein are in fact problematic by pointing out the ways in which they align themselves with other discourses and ideologies, in particular those of the far-right. However, an exclusive focus on far-right ideology in music would obscure some of the more ambivalent forms and performances addressed in this book, although it is the mainstreaming of populist far-right discourses that they seem particularly pitched towards.

Secondly, an account of populism is highly relevant to analyses of a media culture in which political actors are embedded in a politicised global media environment that allows for the rapid and seamless adaptation of strategies and repertoires from one context to another. One can observe this in social media comments by Andreas Gabalier's fans that recall the tweeting style of Donald Trump, the Swedish far-right's ambition to return Sweden to a "lagom" (roughly meaning equilibrial) state, Xavier Naidoo's musical references to globally acclaimed rappers such as Dr. Dre, and in political Twitter debates around the Sanremo festival's choice for Italy's Eurovision Song Contest entry, amongst other instances. Similarly, the Hungarian government's commissioning of a song produced by the internationally renowned US pop music producer Desmond Child, along with an equally government-commissioned music video (Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják 2022), points to the transnational character of contemporary populism in the context of a global media culture. The adaptability of the concept of populism enables the examination of complex transnational interconnections such as these.

Thirdly, there is no clear consensus amongst political scientists and sociologists regarding the question of the people's Others in populism. Whereas some argue that populism is primarily a vertical category, with the people at the bottom challenging the elite at the top – as opposed to nationalism, a horizontal category in which the Other is projected outside the nation (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017) – other researchers conceptualise populism as a framework that pits the people against multiple horizontal and vertical Others simultaneously (Judis 2016; Brubaker 2017). In general, the chapters assembled here, rather than applying one concept of populism to a given national case, have taken these debates as a starting point to examine the specificities of populism in individual contexts. This has enabled the authors to come up with more nuanced and searching conceptualisations that facilitate a deep examination of context-specific particularities, whilst also considering a larger transnational frame of reference. If populism is, as Brubaker calls it, a "discursive and stylistic repertoire" (Brubaker 2017, 360), then we still know very little about the shape of this repertoire. The chapters in this book map the contours of populism, and demonstrate what it means to speak about populism in specific social and cultural contexts.

Whilst the five chapters presented here attend to the ways in which populist discourses are highly contingent on specific contextual factors, there is nevertheless a common frame of reference for the case studies. First, all five of

the countries discussed are European, and members of the European Union and Schengen area. They occupy fairly divergent positions within this supernational political and economic union, however. This was obvious during and after 2008's Great Recession, for instance, when Southern European countries such as Italy were hit hardest, whilst more economically powerful member states such as Germany were able to exert influence on their economic policies. Moreover, people in all of the countries examined here have been affected by some of the crises, or the phenomena framed as such, that we identified in the introduction. These range from the Great Recession to the 2015 "summer of migration" and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, although the effects of these crises have varied depending on national and regional conditions. Likewise, the popularity of and trust in EU institutions differs between countries and populaces. The implementation of austerity politics that followed the Great Recession, for instance, helped to create a disparity regarding trust in the European Union between Southern European countries (where trust is low) on the one side, and Central, Northern, and Western European regions (where levels of trust are higher) on the other (Jansen 2023). What is more, the success of populist and populist far-right parties has also varied in the countries examined here. Whereas the Hungarian populist-nationalist Fidesz party under Viktor Orbán's leadership has been in power since 2010, the populist far-right has not been a part of any government in Germany so far. However, levels of popular support for populist far-right parties have been on the rise since the 2010s in Germany, Sweden, and across Europe. Similarly, countries that had previously seemed immune to any large-scale far-right upsurge have lately undergone deep political and cultural changes. Sweden, in particular, offers a striking example of the recent popular success of the populist radical right, with the Sweden Democrats becoming the largest party in Sweden's right-wing governing bloc in 2022 – a constellation that would have been unthinkable in the mid-2010s. Whilst this afterword cannot provide a detailed account of the macrosocial differences that exist between European Union member states, it is important to note that the popular cultures discussed in this volume are embedded in a common political and economic framework. This creates commonalities and differences, as well as interdependencies, between EU countries at a social level, whilst also providing a set of EU-related semantic references, both common and divergent, that the authors of this volume encountered in their respective fields.

In populist contexts, these references are often charged with the binary antagonism that is typical of populist interpretative frameworks. Accordingly, symbols of the European Union – including the city of Brussels, notable milestones in EU history such as the Lisbon treaty, and leading European politicians such as Jean-Claude Juncker, Angela Merkel, and Mario Draghi – have served to represent an elite that is superimposed onto the nation state, threatening the sovereignty of the people (such as we see in Povia's "Chi comanda il mondo?" as well as the rhetoric of some politicians). The ways in which this semantic realm is interwoven with

socioeconomic realities across EU member states are perhaps most obvious in the example of Hungarian popular music. To emphasise an observation made by Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják:

> The idea of national unity and pride, articulated in a right-wing framework to affirm the moral superiority of the Hungarian people against liberal (Western) Europe, obscures both Hungary's susceptibility to Western European (predominantly German) capital – to which Orbán's regime has subjugated labour rights and vocational training (Éber et al. 2019, 50) – and the "new geopolitics of indebtedness" (Gagyi and Gerőcs 2022), which sees Orbán position Hungary as a gateway to the EU for Russian and Chinese investment.
>
> *(Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják in this volume)*

In sum, the chapters collected here illustrate how social inequalities across the polity of the European Union provide a breeding ground for both historical and new semantic frameworks, symbolic references, and cultural practices that are often tied to populism, nationalism, and far-right discourses.

Cultures of populism: Populism as cultural performance

This book has revealed how populist performances across contemporary European popular cultures involve common cultural practices and revolve around common thematic threads. Populist messages play a large part in popular music widely available in all five countries, and the ways in which people engage with them via the music are as manifold as musicking practices in general. They range from participating in large-scale concerts, to listening to music in politicised beer tents, and following one's favourite musician on social media. Significantly, a major trope that we have observed multiple times in commercially successful popular music across all of the project countries is the performance of crises. Several other themes – such as White masculinity, the celebration of the heroic, and the staging of resistance – can be understood as responses to these crises, where power is wrested from larger forces and returned to the people, thus narratively restoring their agency. Themes such as national cultural memory and nostalgia for a glorious national past were also prominent, and can be regarded as a form of responding to perceived crises by longing for an idealised past that could potentially be restored.

It is evident that the performance of Whiteness plays a central role in the cultures of populism examined in this volume. This Whiteness is tightly bound up with gender. The White male body often functions as a symbol of resistance against perceived cultural dilution or threats to so-called traditional values. In the Italian and Hungarian contexts for instance, cultural performances of populism resonate with the traditional equation that associates masculine imagery with the people, authenticity, and power: in the case of Rumatera in Italy and the pro-government music of Kowalsky meg a Vega in Hungary, the performances emphasise individual

authenticity and glorify the artist as a self-made man with a strong personality. However, both groups also explicitly highlight the ambiguity of these masculinist discourses and the multiple possibilities of interpretation, which they harness to broaden the reach of their music. In the Swedish context, music by the Sweden Democrats draws heavily on the masculinist tradition of radical nationalism (exemplified by the Viking rock band Ultima Thule). Yet, whilst the populist heroic male leader remains central in Bedårande Barn's cover versions of Ultima Thule songs, the masculinity of the original discourse is softened to project a combination of heroism, moderation, and restraint. In Austria, songs by White male artists longing for home as well as spaces such as traditionally gendered beer tents are politicised and nationalised in the context of the populist radical right FPÖ. In German-speaking countries more broadly, artists such as Andreas Gabalier have played an important role in normalising far-right populism in the musical mainstream by staging the White male body as the embodiment of brave warriors engaged in an underdog struggle, representing an autochthonous people against corrupt liberal elites. Therefore, White masculinity plays an important role in representations of the people in the cultural performance of populism. Music culture then functions as a catalyst for the mainstreaming of populism as musicians not only draw on and update popular and hegemonic notions of White masculinity, but also position them in a populist struggle of us against them.

Certainly, the presence of individual musicians of colour in some of the cases discussed here should not be taken to indicate that Europe has arrived at a post-racial settlement. Quite the contrary, it demonstrates that the populist far-right, in particular, has adapted to the realities of the pluralist societies in which it is seeking to increase its power. Xavier Naidoo is perhaps the most prominent example here of a renowned musician of colour who has contributed to the dissemination of far-right populist discourse and conspiracy theories. It is worth noting that, as opposed to the centring of the White male body in the example of Gabalier, Naidoo's performances centre his voice rather than his body. Nonetheless, the fact that Naidoo is a celebrity and a person of colour has been exploited by the far-right, who have portrayed him not only as a victim of liberal elites but as evidence of their corruption, as they apparently fail to adhere to their own anti-racism: Naidoo serves to exemplify how supposedly "woke" liberal elites turn against the minorities that they claim to protect as soon as these minorities refuse to adhere to the norms of liberal speech.

Women artists have been much less prominent than men in the case studies presented here. To some extent, this corresponds to our empirical findings: there were significantly fewer female musicians relevant to our field in each country sample. This is true both in the larger field of popular music with potential populist affordances, and in the realm of more explicitly populist or far-right populist political figures. Nevertheless, there are some women artists, that we have not discussed here, who have clearly contributed to mainstreaming the populist far-right. In Germany, musicians such as Melanie Müller, who has been accused of performing the

Hitler salute at one of her shows, come to mind. So do activists of the Identitarian movement such as Melanie Halle. The German celebrity singer Nena, although not a far-right musician or activist, expressed solidarity with Naidoo on social media and encouraged her audience to ignore the security measures related to Covid-19. In Austria, next to the girlish Melissa Naschenweng's highly popular music at FPÖ events, there is the punk schlager star Hannah who alludes to symbols of the New Right. In Sweden, artists such as Louise Andersson Bodin and Fröken Snusk have gained popularity with songs that attack the environmentalism of Greta Thunberg, the politics of the former social democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven, and Covid-19 vaccinations, whilst celebrating rural identity and, to follow Ostiguy, a flaunting of the low associated with genres such as Raggarmusik and Epadunk. Although not explored at length in this book, the performance of White femininity can therefore become relevant on a symbolic level as well. As Gabriele Dietze has demonstrated, the French far-right all-women group Les Brigandes, for instance, stage the White female body as emblematic of an innocent European continent threatened by immigration. In so doing, they evoke the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, according to which liberal-minded elites are seeking to replace ethnic European populations with migrants to gain votes and increase their own power (Dietze 2023).

In all of the case studies presented here, populist cultural performances frequently rely on nostalgia. Nostalgic references to an idealised past evoke a longing for – and return to – a supposedly better and simpler time. Memory culture reinforces populist narratives by framing a specific act, artist, party, or politician as the custodian of traditional values and defender against perceived threats to the cultural fabric. The European populisms examined here therefore frequently draw upon elements of traditionalism, and incorporate nostalgic references to cultural heritage, collective identification, and national identity. Such neo-traditionalism may resonate with certain audiences who, affected by rapid social change as well as social and economic crises, seek a sense of stability and belonging. Populist articulations therefore often include a strong tendency to (re-)shape official cultural memory. In Hungary, specifically, we have witnessed not only a nationalist retelling of history in museums (such as The House of Terror under the supervision of Mária Schmidt), but also how government-commissioned songs can play a central role in constructing populist-nationalist discourses, such as that of a Greater Hungary, whose shared history connects Hungarians beyond the borders of the current nation state. In Sweden, musical populism and nationalism mobilise collective memory by affording feelings of nostalgia for the *folkhem* ("people's home") as a lost national ideal to be reconstructed, and for an ethnically defined Swedish culture associated with collective community singing (*Allsång*). Similarly, in the Italian context, populist articulations in popular music cultures draw on notions of (stereotypical) Italianness, a national music repertoire, and the tradition of the Sanremo festival. In the German and Austrian contexts, musicians such as Gabalier perform folk(-ish) music in pseudo-traditional folkloric attire whilst reaffirming

far-right populist frames and performatively challenging the directives of an allegedly liberal political, cultural, and media elite. As we have also seen, these performances are not always consistent in their political messaging and may be subject to populism's adaptability.

This kind of nostalgia and memory culture within populist contexts is often bound to the space of a rural "heartland" (Taggart 2000). By locating the cradle of a nation's culture in such an imagined, central space, far-right populist performances, in particular, often reaffirm a divide between rural and urban communities that echoes the binary antagonism between the people and the elite. The countryside then becomes a signifier for the continuity of an ethnically defined people's culture which, uncorrupted over many years, is held up as a source of national renewal and of a stable identity in the face of ongoing crises. Such nostalgia for a pure cultural wellspring in the countryside is not new in popular music culture. In many countries, it has been a pillar of folk music entertainment since at least the nineteenth century. However, in a polarised political and cultural environment, it tends to be tied to populist politics, as it allows political actors to set the people off against a detached, liberal urban elite and their ethnically diverse urban environment. This is exemplified in the beer tent politics of the FPÖ, the celebration of rural lifestyles in Gabalier's music, and the bucolicism of Rumatera, Ákos, and Bedårande Barn. These articulations often draw on a national, romantic aesthetic to situate a specific landscape or territory in a political struggle and mark it as potentially endangered. Rather than merely a site of natural beauty, then, the heartland is a collectively imagined and highly politicised space that serves as a call to political action.

Another central element of the cultures of populism as described in this volume is a complex articulation of the people and class, often associated with certain taste cultures and aesthetics. As Bourdieu (1984) has pointed out, cultural practices can function as markers of social position, whereby the preferences of the dominant class constitute legitimate taste, and any deviation from this by the lower classes is criticised as vulgar. Populist cultural expressions hence often involve the performance of class identification and the portrayal of a normative ideal, as populist rhetoric emphasises the concerns of the so-called common people and creates a dichotomy between the ordinary and the elite. Many of the case studies explored here highlight the significance of populist identifications against highbrow tastes. This may take the form of an appeal to a supposedly working-class authenticity, as discussed in relation to Emma Marrone and Rocco Hunt, or of an emphasis on the performance of normality along the lines of a middle-brow culture, as opposed to any aesthetic or political radicalism. In Hungary, for instance, we have seen clearly how both the policies and musical expressions of the populist Orbán regime emphasise the creation of a new middle class with its associated cultural characteristics and an imagined common taste as the norm. Similarly, the music of the Sweden Democrats is keen to vaunt its own "averageness," as a means of establishing a "normal" Swedish middle class as the subject of their populist identification.

Not least due to its inherent difference from – and sometimes opposition to – highbrow culture, popular music culture as a field is highly relevant to patterns of political and cultural change in contemporary democracies for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is extremely significant to the lifeworlds of a very large number of people. Secondly, it is shot through with ideas of who the authentic people are. Thirdly, it is ingrained in contemporary media environments. Fourthly, it draws on a rich history and repertoire of musical politics – from the protest song tradition to music festivals (such as Woodstock) that have become iconic in the narrativisation of political and cultural history. Finally, it enables for identification to be mobilised without explicit political statements. The significance of this latter point to contemporary politics is a particularly important finding of this volume: from Salvini to Orbán, the FPÖ, and Åkesson, politicians rely on music's ambiguity to (re-)position themselves in both the political attention economy and the political economy of affect. One and the same piece of music can be politicised to mobilise a particular set of affects that are politically useful at a given time. But music can be de-politicised too, when the downplaying of musical politics seems strategically wise. It is important to note that this latter strategy, the de-politicisation of music, can be motivated by more explicit political aims as well, as when, for example, it may serve to demonstrate the alleged oversensitivity of "woke" liberals, who can be portrayed as unjustifiably offended by an otherwise innocuous musical performance.

As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, populist and far-right populist cultural articulations as they play out in contemporary Europe construct and reinforce identities, divisions, and antagonisms through various cultural practices, narratives, and tropes. These include the performance of crises, the White male body, the heroic, notions of tradition, the urban-rural divide, memory culture, and nostalgia. Some of these threads and tropes are interwoven with exclusionary and discriminatory practices such as classism, racism, antisemitism, and sexism. Understanding the intricate relationship between populism, far-right discourses, and popular culture is therefore essential to grasping the mechanisms through which populist discourses gain traction and permeate societies. Including this dimension in the study of populism is in fact crucial for understanding political change in contemporary Europe: populism is neither solely an ideology nor a question of individual attitudes. Nor is it a set of superficial performances to be studied by merely analysing forms and aesthetics. Populism is socially grounded and integral to many contemporary cultures. As such, it is articulated and experienced in the myriad epistemologies, modes of communication, media environments, affective responses, and structures of feeling that characterise what we have described as cultures of populism. We hope that by critically analysing the dynamics of popular (music) cultures, this volume may help to foster a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between populism, the far right, culture, and broader social and political contexts in Europe.

Importantly, the model of cross-European comparison applied in this volume should not be taken to suggest that the field of European popular music culture is a closed realm, largely separated from other transnational music cultures. Rather, we have observed several interactions between our case studies and the global field of popular music, from the Southern rock used by Gabalier to the R&B and rap in Naidoo's music, or the global performances of Ismerős Arcok's "Nélküled" to the centrality of a Eurovision Song Contest aesthetic in Sweden and Italy. Admittedly, the approach used in this volume prioritises intra-European entanglements, leaving global and international contexts largely unexamined. Further studies are required to unpick the intricate ways in which the rise of populist articulations in European popular music cultures is connected with developments elsewhere. In this context, it is also important to acknowledge how popular music – despite our focus on the mainstreaming of populism as well as nationalist and far-right discourses – continues to function as a site of struggle where popular artists and citizens alike can critically engage with, talk back to, and resist some of the populist and nationalist forces discussed in this book. Indeed, additional research is needed to build on this volume's analysis of populist performances and highlight popular culture's ongoing potential as an arena that affords creative expression and critical engagement with larger social and political questions which, in many cases, exceed national borders.

In conclusion, the chapters collected here demonstrate the crucial role played by popular music in the mainstreaming of populism in contemporary Europe. Here, popular music serves as both an illustration and catalyst of the multi-layered processes through which the mainstreaming of populism operates as a cultural phenomenon. On the one hand, we have seen how populist actors utilise, and populist discourses find expression within, popular culture. Political positions that would once have been considered radical or extreme are rearticulated in the language and style of pop music, their aesthetics softened and their messages made accessible and palatable for large (often middle-class) audiences. In the case of contemporary European cultures, this is particularly true of the combination of populism with nationalist and far-right discourses and performances. Through catchy melodies, relatable lyrics, and captivating performances, popular music acts as a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of such discourses to a wide audience, often presenting them as socially acceptable and even desirable. On the other hand, the studies in this volume show that popular music can accelerate the potential for radicalisation present within society, and that, rather than being a unidirectional process of normalisation from the political fringe to the social centre, the mainstreaming of populism through music also works via the mobilisation, politicisation, and radicalisation of common cultural tropes and narratives. Popular culture is, therefore, not only the realm in which the boundaries between populist discourses, along with their associated far-right content, and the social mainstream are negotiated, but where these boundaries become increasingly blurry. Popular music's role in

the mainstreaming of populism hence reflects the complex interplay between the normalisation of radical ideas and the potential for social radicalisation.

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